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BROWNING AND DOGMA

LONDON: GEORGE BELL AND SONS  
PORTUGAL ST. LINCOLN'S INN, W.C.  
CAMBRIDGE: DEIGHTON, BELL & CO.  
NEW YORK: THE MACMILLAN CO.  
BOMBAY: A. H. WHEELER & CO.

# BROWNING AND DOGMA

SEVEN LECTURES ON BROWNING'S ATTITUDE  
TOWARDS DOGMATIC RELIGION

BY

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LONDON  
GEORGE BELL AND SONS  
1906





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## ERRATA

Page 32, line 21, *for* "four hundred years" *read* "five hundred."

Page 39, line 11, *for* "men to become" *read* "man."

Page 71, line 30, *for* "interval of six years, in 1847" *read* "four years, in 1845."

Page 71, line 31, *for* "1853" *read* "1851."



LECTURE I  
INTRODUCTORY,  
AND  
CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS



# BROWNING AND DOGMA

## LECTURE I

### INTRODUCTORY, AND CALIBAN UPON SETEBOS

He at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.<sup>1</sup>

TO this faith, to this assurance, is largely attributable the influence unquestionably possessed by Browning as a teacher in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. For the intentionally didactic element in the work may not honestly be ignored in whatever degree it is held to militate against artistic merit. Amid the throng of seekers after Truth in the world of poetry, Browning stands pre-eminent as one who not only sought Truth, but, having gained what he held to be Truth, kept it as "the sole prize of Life." Poets of the school of thought of which Matthew Arnold and A. H. Clough may perhaps be regarded as among the more prominent exponents, are able to give no even approximately satisfying answer to the questionings bound inevitably to arise, at some time or other, in all minds whose energies are not dissipated by a too ready compliance with the demands of the hour. In certain moods their work appeals to us irresistibly, but the appeal is one of sympathy with doubt rather

<sup>1</sup> *La Saisiaz*, l. 604. *R. Browning*, vol. ii, Smith, Elder and Co.

than of suggestion of solution. The author of *Obermann* may indeed in "hours of gloom" remind us that there have been "hours of insight"; that the individual soul, though through prolonged struggle and effort alone, may "mount hardly to eternal life." The consolation he would offer to spiritual depression is that of self-dependence. Nature may soothe, but is powerless to satisfy; the appeal to her is answered by that which, although "severely clear," is but "an air-born voice," directing the enquirer back upon himself—

Resolve to be thyself, and know that he  
Who finds himself loses his misery.<sup>1</sup>

So, too, Clough, sympathizing fully with doubt, may in his more inspired moments speak of hope and of the assurance

'Tis better to have fought and lost  
Than never to have fought at all.

Although from his pen has come at least one short poem<sup>2</sup> worthy in invigorating force of the faith of Browning himself, yet the note of defeat rather than the ring of triumph is more generally characteristic of his language. Tennyson had splendid glimpses of the Truth, passing visions of glory; yet here, too, the vision was but transitory, the full glory evanescent.

The continued popularity of *In Memoriam* is undoubtedly due in large measure to the fact that the author has there given poetic utterance to those questionings and aspirations of the human soul, peculiar to no time or place, to no nation or form of creed—to the cry wrung from the heart when inexorable Death brings with it the hour of separation. There is in truth a triumphant note towards the close of *In Me-*

<sup>1</sup> *Self dependence.* Matt. Arnold.

<sup>2</sup> *Say not the struggle nought availeth.*

*moriam*: the child of the fifty-fourth stanza "crying in the night, and with no language but a cry," though yet crying in the night, becomes in the final section (stanza cxxiv) a child "who knows his father near." But even when the heart rises triumphantly, and in defiance of the arguments of reason asserts "I have felt," the faith so expressed is not the faith of Browning. Beyond all the temporary darkness of *La Saisiaz* we recognize that the author of *Asolando* is speaking nothing more than the truth when he tells us that he "never doubted clouds would break." The dispersal of the clouds gathered over La Salève added confidence to the *Epilogue* which constitutes so fitting a close to the life's work. The assertion "I believe in God and Truth and Love," expressed through the medium of the lover of Pauline, finds its echo in the more direct personal assertion of the concluding lines of *La Saisiaz*, "He believed in Soul, was very sure of God." This was the irreducible minimum of Browning's creed. How much more he held as absolute, soul-satisfying truth it is the design of this and the six following lectures to determine.

And here at once on the threshold of our investigation we are confronted by the difficulty inseparable from any consideration of Browning's literary work; the difficulty of eliminating the dramatic and gauging the extent of the purely personal element. Although, as was inevitable, such difficulty has been universally recognized by critics and students, yet the very strength of the dramatic power has in many cases proved misleading. Browning has too completely lost himself in his subject. In the writings of the man capable of merging his personal identity in that of an Andrea and a Pippa, of a Caliban and a S. John; of assuming positions as opposed as those of a Guido and a Caponsacchi, it is a sufficiently simple matter to discover opinions supporting directly or indirectly any individual line of thought. To him who

seeks with intent to obtain such confirmation may the promise be fairly made

As is your sort of mind  
So is your sort of search; you'll find  
What you desire.<sup>1</sup>

Moreover, whilst the obscurity of the writing has been the subject of too general comment, the frequently elusive character of the meaning may be liable to escape notice. A certain course of thought having been detected is accepted to the exclusion of an even more important undercurrent only now and again rising to the surface. Despite the difficulties attendant upon a genuine study of Browning, both from the frequently recondite character of the subject and the amount of literary or historical knowledge demanded of the reader, comparatively slight attempt has so far been made towards a detailed treatment of individual poems such as that, for example, accorded to the plays of Shakespeare. And yet such concentrative labour possesses the highest value as a protection against misconstruction arising from a too hastily formed conception of the relative proportions of personal intention and dramatic presentation. Having once fallen into the error of accepting an under-estimate (an over-estimate is rarely possible) of the histrionic element in certain avowedly dramatic soliloquies, there is danger lest the temptation of seeking amongst others confirmation of the theory thus suggested should prove too strong for our literary honesty.

Any investigation as to Browning's attitude towards religion in the wider acceptance of the term—as that which relates to the spiritual element in human nature and life—must of necessity be co-extensive with his work. For him to whom “the development of a soul” was the object alone worthy the

<sup>1</sup> *Easter Day*, vii.



devotion of the intellectual faculties, it was inevitable that to the consideration of this spiritual element his mind should continually revert. From *Pauline* to *Asolando* it is hardly too much to say such consideration is never absent. With the addition to the title of our subject of the term *dogmatic*, the scope of the inquiry is at once narrowed, whilst the difficulty of ascertaining fairly the position is possibly proportionately increased, since the writer, who has been designated "the most Christian poet of the century," is claimed by Unitarians as their own. It is, therefore, of especial importance in dealing with the subject that no assumption be made, no assertion advanced, unsupported by adequate proof. The direct statements of the few non-dramatic poems afford us, however, some vantage-ground whence to begin our advance; for the rest, progress must be made through careful comparison of the dramatic poems as to subject and treatment, (we may not judge of one poem apart from the rest) recognizing that the dramatic character of the soliloquy does not necessarily *exclude*, as it does not necessarily *imply*, an expression of the author's own opinions. When, therefore, we find the same theme perpetually treated through the medium of different externals, when we are met by similar expressions of belief emanating from the various soliloquists of the *Dramatis Personae* and the *Men and Women Series*, we may not unreasonably hold ourselves to possess fair *prima facie* evidence that in a theory so treated is centred much of the interest of the writer; in the arguments deduced is to be accepted a more or less definite expression of the writer's own belief, or at least of that form of creed to which he is most strongly attracted.

Of the five poems chosen as illustrative or explanatory of Browning's attitude towards that which we have designated *dogmatic* religion, one only, *La Saisiaz*, the latest in point of

time, is non-dramatic in character. Between the other four a line of connection is easily established, since all deal with different aspects of the same subject regarded through different media. If, then, beginning with the lowest link of the chain, we gain by means of a consideration of *Caliban* some realization of the dramatic feats which Browning could accomplish at pleasure, we shall find less difficulty in distinguishing between the dramatic and personal elements in *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* where the line of demarcation is more finely drawn.

In *Caliban upon Setebos* (from the *Men and Women Series* of 1855) is presented the lowest conception of a Deity and of his dealings with the world and humanity, as evolved by a being incapable of aspiration, satisfied with existing conditions in so far, although in so far only, as they afford opportunity for material gratification. With *Cleon* follows the substitution of the Greek conception of life at the beginning of the Christian era, speculations as to the design of Zeus in his intercourse with man. The speculator, at once poet, musician, artist, to whom have been accessible all the stores of Greek philosophy and Greek culture, feels inevitably the necessity for the existence of a Deity differing from that of the monster of Prospero's isle. Nevertheless to the Greek thinker the immortality of the soul is not yet more than a vague suggestion, the outcome of desire. His world has come into touch, but at its extreme edge, with the recently promulgated tenets of Christianity. To this inhabitant of "the sprinkled isles" the teaching of the Apostles of Galilee is so far "a doctrine to be held by no sane man": and yet his very yearning, nay, even his reasonable deductions from the experience of life, point to the need of "doctrines" such as those which he now deems impossible of credence. Of the character of the changes separating the world of religious

thought of Blougram from that of Cleon, suggestions are afforded by the *Epilogue* to the *Dramatis Personae*. The Christianity which Cleon criticized from afar has, by the date of the Bishop's *Apology*, become the creed of the civilized world. Not only has the time passed when

The Temple filled with a cloud,  
Even the House of the Lord,  
Porch bent and pillar bowed :  
For the presence of the Lord,  
In the glory of His Cloud,  
Had filled the House of the Lord.

(*Epilogue, Dram. Pers.*)

But more than this, the *simplicity* of the earlier faith is at an end. Past, too, are those mediaeval days when the faith of a prelate of the Church would have been assumed without question by the lay world. Both stages of development have been left behind, but the yet later condition has not been attained when scepticism shall cause as little comment as did the childlike faith of the Middle Ages: a condition defined by the lament of Renan—

Gone now ! All gone across the dark so far,  
Sharpening fast, shuddering ever, shutting still,  
Dwindling into the distance, dies that star  
Which came, stood, opened once !

(*Epilogue, Dram. Pers.*)

*Bishop Blougram's Apology* is a possible exposition of the religious attitude of a professing Christian of the nineteenth century. It matters little whether his form of creed be that of Anglican or Roman Catholic: his position as a dignitary of the Church alone compels apology. From these unquestionably dramatic poems we pass to one, the classification of which appears to be usually regarded as less obvious, judging from the criticisms of commentators. How far the decision

of the soliloquist in *Christmas Eve* may be justly held as that of Browning himself is a question requiring separate and careful consideration (to be given in the Sixth Lecture). Here it is sufficient to notice that, entering the confines of dogmatic religion, in this poem has found more immediate expression that which we may fairly deem one principle, at least, of the teaching which its author would impress upon his public; that in no one form of creed is the Divine influence to be exclusively found; that wherever love dwells, in however limited a degree, there, too, may with confidence be sought the Presence of the Supreme Love. In *Easter Day* the discussion is again transferred to a wider plane and deals with the individual difficulties involved in an unconditional acceptance of Christianity itself—difficulties in the end not only acknowledged as inevitable, but thankfully accepted by the speaker as essential to the strengthening of personal faith, to the advancement of individual development. Finally, with *La Saisiaz* we are brought face to face unmistakably with the struggle, with the doubts and yearnings of Browning himself at a critical hour of life, twelve years before the end—a struggle whence he was ultimately to issue with faith in the fundamental articles of his belief confirmed and deepened.

Of other poems bearing more or less directly upon the subject, the most notable as well as the most familiar, are probably *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, *An Epistle of Karshish*, and *A Death in the Desert*. Of these, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, in its treatment of the theory of asceticism and of the working out of the design of the perfect unity of the individual human life, goes further afield and carries us beyond the limits of any definite dogma: though on the ascetic side it may serve as comment on some of the conclusions of *Easter Day*. *An Epistle of Karshish* embodies two of Browning's favourite themes: (1) the essentially probationary character

of human life as exemplified by the attitude of Lazarus towards things temporal, an attitude at once becoming *super-human* through a revelation obviating the necessity for faith ; (2) the collateral suggestions contained in the estimate of Christianity conceived by the Arab physician. Of these, the first may be well employed as a comparison with the final decision of *Easter Day*, the second with the references of Cleon to the Apostolic teaching. *A Death in the Desert* offers but another form of refutation of the results of the German methods of Biblical criticism represented by the teaching of the Göttingen Professor of *Christmas Eve*. Direct declarations of faith such as those contained in *Prospice* and the *Epilogue* to *Asolando* serve but as confirmation of the assertion standing at the head of this Lecture.

To a superficial consideration the first of the dramatic poems is not pre-eminently attractive, nor as a soliloquist is Caliban attractive in the ordinary acceptation of the term as an appeal to the senses affording distinctly pleasurable sensations. But the attraction peculiar to the grotesque in any form is here present in a marked degree : an attraction frequently stronger than that exerted by the purely beautiful, involving as it does a more direct intellectual appeal ; since grotesqueness, whether in Nature or in Art, does not usually denote simplicity. And Caliban is by no means a simple being, rather is he a singularly remarkable creation even for the genius of Browning. As we know, the idea suggested itself whilst the poet was reading *The Tempest*, when there flashed through his mind the passage from the Psalms (l, 21) which stands beneath the title: "Thou thoughtest that I was altogether such a one as thyself." In a recognition of the full significance of this fact may be found the key to all seeming inconsistencies which have evoked criticisms describing the poem from its theological aspect as a "monstrous

Bridgewater treatise,"<sup>1</sup> and "a fragment of Browning's own Christian apologetics," the "reasoning" of Caliban as "an initial absurdity,"<sup>2</sup> whilst Caliban himself is designated "a savage with the introspective powers of a Hamlet and the theology of an Evangelical clergyman"<sup>3</sup>—the entire scheme of this "wonderful" work being even summarized as a "design to describe the way in which a primitive nature may at once be afraid of its gods and yet familiar with them."<sup>4</sup> There is perhaps more to be said for the poem than the suggestions involved in any or all of these comments. A protracted investigation as to how far Browning's Caliban is an immediate development of the Caliban of *The Tempest* would be beside the main object of these Lectures; but for an understanding of the value to be reasonably attached to the soliloquy it is essential to estimate as fairly as may be possible the character, intellectual and moral, of the soliloquist, since Caliban's conception of his Creator must necessarily be influenced by the limitations of his own powers, whether physical or mental. For here, as elsewhere in the dramatic poems, Browning has completely identified himself with his soliloquist. How far, therefore, we are justified in claiming for Caliban's theology the title of "a fragment of Browning's own Christian apologetics" can only be decided by a careful consideration and a comparison with work not avowedly dramatic in character.

Reading again those scenes of *The Tempest*, in which Caliban plays a part, we become more than ever convinced that the Caliban of the poem is but the Caliban of the play seen through the medium of Browning's phantasy. This,

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, E. Dowden, J. M. Dent and Co., p. 243.

<sup>2</sup> *R. Browning*, W. Sharp (*Great Writers*), p. 207.

<sup>3</sup> *Browning Cyclopaedia*, Berdoo, p. 91 (quoted).

<sup>4</sup> *R. Browning*, G. K. Chesterton (*Eng. Men of Letters*), p. 135.

however, is not equivalent to the admission of simplicity as a characteristic of this strange being, merely is it a recognition that the potentialities existent in Shakespeare's Caliban are nearer to becoming actualities in the Caliban of Browning. Caliban's may, indeed, be the nature of a primitive being, but the nature is not, therefore, simple; to the peculiarly complex character of his personality is due the main interest of the poem—curiously undeveloped in some departments of his nature, the moral sense appears to be almost non-existent, he is, nevertheless, an imaginative creature with a distinct poetic and artistic vein in his composition. Whilst Prospero's estimate of him seems to have been a fairly accurate one :

The most lying slave  
Whom stripes may move, not kindness ;

as Mr. Stopford Brooke has pointed out "his very cursing is imaginative" <sup>1</sup>—

As wicked dew as e'er my mother brushed  
With raven's feather from unwholesome fen  
Drop on you both. (Act I, Sc. ii.)

And it is Caliban who appreciates the music of Ariel which to Trinculo and Stephano, products of civilization so-called, is a thing fearful as the work of the devil.

Be not afeard ; the isle is full of noises,  
Sounds, and sweet airs, that give delight and hurt not.  
(Act III, Sc. ii.)

Such is the re-assurance offered by the "man-monster" of Shakespeare. But the Caliban of Browning is yet in his primitive condition, untouched by contact with the outer world as represented even by these dregs of a civilization which, whilst checking the expression of the brutish instinct,

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, S. Brooke, Isbister, p. 288.

increases by repression the force of passions struggling for an outlet to which conventionality bars the way.

To the Caliban of *The Tempest* Prospero rather than Setebos is the immediate author of the evils of his environment. He has not yet reached the stage of formulated speculation with regard to the character of his mother's god—to which Browning's Caliban shows himself to have attained. And it is worthy of notice that the Caliban of the poem does not accept without examination such information as he has received from Sycorax concerning Setebos. Only after due consideration does he advance his own ideas (not according with those of Sycorax) on the subject; proving himself thus capable not merely of imagination but of reasoning; his intellect is alive whatever limitations may be assigned to its capacity for exercise. Although no immediate evidence is afforded of the capabilities of Shakespeare's Caliban in the regions of abstract thought, yet of the potential existence of the ratiocinative faculty sufficient testimony is afforded by his attitude towards the supernatural powers of Prospero, by his scheme for rendering the new-comers instruments, subserving his own interests in his designs against his employer and tyrant—all this clearly the outcome of something more than a mere brute cunning.

With these aspects of the character of Caliban before him as ground-work, Browning has developed his poem; and in the twenty-three opening lines, introductory to the definite reflections concerning Setebos, are discoverable evidences of all the characteristics of the Caliban of *The Tempest*. Browning has done nothing without intention, and we are here prepared, or should be prepared, for what is to follow later in the poem. Here the "man-monster" is described as sprawling in the mire, in the enjoyment of such comfort as may be derived from the sunshine in the heat of the day: the



sensuous side of the nature finding its satisfaction in

Kicking both feet in the cool slush

and feeling

About his spine small eft things course,

Run in and out each arm, and make him laugh. (ll. 5, 6.)

At the same time is recognizable the artistic element in the composition—for not only does he enjoy

A fruit to snap at, catch and crunch,

but he

Looks out o'er yon sea which sunbeams cross

And recross till they weave a spider-web

(Meshes of fire, some great fish breaks at times.) (ll. 11-14.)

Here is assuredly the language of no mere savage! Compare with this the later descriptions of the inhabitants of the island as assigned to Setebos (ll. 44-55). No mere dry category of animal life, it suggests the result of the observations of a mind at once poetic and imaginative.

Yon otter, sleek-wet, black, lithe as a leech,

Yon auk, one fire-eye in a ball of foam,

That floats and feeds; a certain badger brown

He hath watched hunt with that slant white-wedge eye

By moonlight; and the pie with the long tongue

That pricks deep into oakwarts for a worm,

And says a plain word when she finds her prize,

But will not eat the ants: the ants themselves

That build a wall of seeds and settled stalks

About their hole.

Not because this is the work of a poet, but because it is the work of a *dramatic* poet do we get these lines: and Browning has unquestionably, I think, given its character to this earlier passage with intention. He would suggest that this element—poetic and imaginative—in Caliban's nature must of necessity influence his conception of his Deity.

But whilst emphasis is thus given to the sensuous and

artistic aspects of the character of this most complex being, by these introductory lines is more than suggested the obliquity of the moral nature—this, too, influencing, as is inevitable, its theology. Deception is to the Caliban of Browning as to the Caliban of Shakespeare, the very breath of life. His pleasure in inactivity is vastly intensified by the consciousness that he is thereby defrauding Prospero and Miranda of the fruits of his labours.

It is good to cheat the pair, and gibe,  
Letting the rank tongue blossom into speech. (ll. 22, 23.)

Immediately combined with this is the form of cowardice distinctive of the lowest moral grade, the cowardice which would insult whilst occupying a position of security, but which grovels before the object of its antipathy as soon as it sees reason to fear approaching vengeance. To the mere physical pleasure of basking in the sunlight is added not alone the negative gratification of the consciousness of defrauding his employer, but the more active enjoyment of soliloquizing concerning "that Setebos whom his dam called God." And why? With the sole purpose of affording him annoyance. In the winter-time such discussion might prove dangerous to the speaker, as Caliban possesses an insurmountable dread of that "cold" so powerful a weapon in the hands of his Deity. Even in summer he deems it desirable to avoid a too openly offered challenge to Setebos; hence the employment throughout his soliloquy of the third person, singular, in a curious attempt to mislead his hearer.

And what according to Browning's theory as expressed elsewhere are we to expect of the god of this untaught, half-savage being, morally undeveloped, with artistic and poetic faculties already awakening? More or less will it necessarily be the outcome of his own experiences. A commentary on that familiar passage which S. John in *A Death in the Desert*

(ll. 412-419) puts into the mouth of the objector to the truth of the facts of Christianity, who would regard the conception of the Godhead as subjective rather than objective in character. First in the history of the race came the ascription to the Deity of hands, feet, and bodily parts; then followed the human passions of pride and anger. Finally, all yield to the higher attributes of "power, love, and will," these succeeding to and supplanting the earlier characteristics. In his imaginary answer the Evangelist is represented as attributing these changes of conception to the necessity of growth in human nature whereby man uses such aids to his development as may be attainable. The Truth itself remaining unaltered and unalterable, man obtains from time to time fuller glimpses thereof, the greater superseding, even apparently falsifying, the less. Caliban, uniting the two earlier conceptions of the Deity—as a being possessed of bodily parts and human passions—offers but the merest suggestion of any further and higher development. Yet there are such *indirect*, should we rather say *negative*, suggestions observable towards the close of the poem.

To Setebos is assigned as a dwelling-place "the cold o' the moon," possibly because the speaker feels it satisfactory that the god whom he fears should be at what he deems a distance sufficiently remote from his own habitation; partly also because to him "the cold o' the moon" or, indeed, any cold, is suggestive of intensely disagreeable sensations, and to his unsatisfactory environment he ascribes the attempts of Setebos towards creation as designed to effect a change in his own condition. All things animate or inanimate inhabiting the island have been, according to Caliban, the work of Setebos. What still lies beyond the range of his creative power? Not the sun, as might have been anticipated, since to Caliban its agency is purely beneficial, and its in-

fluence apparently of limitless extent; not the sun, "clouds, winds, meteors," but the stars. These "came otherwise," how or by what means the soliloquist is unable to determine.

Then arises the further question. If, indeed, Setebos is the author of the visible creation, what has been the motive instigating him to the work? In accordance with Caliban's experience of his own nature, it is impossible that any motive other than self-interest in some form or another should have actuated the Creator: hence he attributes the design to the discomfort of the dwelling-place "in the cold o' the moon." Nevertheless, even after the creation of the sun its warmth proved insufficient for comfort, the god failed to enjoy "the air he was not born to breathe." Again, in the constitution of the animate beings inhabiting the island he strove to realize (so says Caliban) "what himself would fain in a manner be." Hence the creatures made by Setebos are "weaker in most points" than is the god himself, yet "stronger in a few." A theory suggesting an interesting comparison with the arguments by which David in *Saul* deduces the necessity of an Incarnation. Caliban ascribes to Setebos the power of originating faculties which he does not himself possess, and which in the nature of things he might, therefore, be deemed incapable of realizing. The illustration or comparison offered is that of Caliban's own imagined occupation in an idle moment, when the idea occurs to him to make a bird of clay, endowing it with the power of flight, a power not numbered amongst his own capabilities. Thus he holds that Setebos, too, may create living beings, bestowing upon them faculties which he is himself incapable of exercising, making them, though, "weaker in some points, stronger in a few." To the more cultivated intelligence of the Hebrew psalmist, as represented by Browning, such theory is untenable. That "the creature [should] surpass

the Creator—the end what Began”<sup>1</sup> is as incomprehensible as it is illogical. Love existent in the creature is to David proof sufficient of the existence of love in the Creator. So thinks not Caliban. And yet with the curious inconsistency marking the reasoning of the slowly developing intellect, Setebos is represented as mocking his creatures whilst envying the capabilities with which he has gifted them. Thus:

So brave, so better though they be,  
It nothing skills if He begins to plague. (ll. 66, 67.)

As the creation has been the result of mere wantonness, so the recognition of all appeal from created beings to the Creator will be governed by the same caprice. As with Caliban's imagined dealings with his clay bird, he would do good or ill accordingly

As the chance were this might take or else  
Not take my fancy. (ll. 90-91.)

So also is the action of the Deity towards his creation in all relations of life. He has elected Prospero for a career of “knowledge and power,” and, as his servant judges, one of supreme comfort, whilst he has appointed Caliban, equally deserving—in his own estimation—to hold the position of slave.

He hath a spite against me, that I know,  
Just as He favours Prosper, who knows why? (ll. 202-203.)

Power which is irresponsible is exercised in a manner wholly capricious. There is no more satisfactory explanation of the dealings of Setebos with his creatures than that which Caliban can offer for his own treatment of the crabs

That march now from the mountain to the sea,  
when he may

<sup>1</sup> *Saul*, 268.

Let twenty pass, and stone the twenty-first,  
Loving not, hating not, just choosing so. (ll. 101-103.)

Of one thing the savage deems himself assured, again judging from the pettiness which he finds existent in his own nature. Of one thing he is assured—that the wrath of the god is most readily to be kindled through envy, envy of the very objects of his own creation. A display of happiness is the surest method of incurring his vengeance; therefore

Even so, 'would have Him misconceive, suppose  
This Caliban strives hard and ails no less,  
And always, above all else, envies Him: (ll. 263-265.)

a belief inherent in all pre-Christian creeds in intimate connection with the doctrine of sacrifice, the place of which in the theology of Caliban must receive separate consideration. So does Herakles warn Admetus against indulgence in a supreme happiness,

Only the rapture must not grow immense:  
Take care, nor wake the envy of the Gods.<sup>1</sup>

Thus will Caliban in spite kill two flies, basking "on the pompion-bell above," whilst he gives his aid to

Two black painful beetles [who] roll their ball  
On head and tail as if to save their lives. (ll. 260-261.)

Such are, according to Browning, some of the main features of the "Natural Theology in the Island," suggesting conditions of life at once depressing and degrading: no satisfaction for the present but in deception of the over-ruling power, the sole hope for the future, that this dread being may tire of his early creation and hence relax his malicious watch in favour of a new and distant world, made "to please him more." It is not difficult to conceive of such a creed as the

<sup>1</sup> *Balaustion's Adventure*, vol. i, p. 660.

outcome of deductions from the teaching of Sycorax, who held that "the Quiet" was the virtual creator, the work of Setebos being limited to disturbing and "vexing" these creations of the Quiet. In this aspect Setebos would appear as representative of the powers of evil. And of great interest in any study of Browning are the suggestions resulting from Caliban's treatment of the subject. (1) He holds that the author of evil must be supreme. That the Quiet, had he been the creator, *could* unquestionably, and, therefore, *would* most certainly have rendered his creatures of strength sufficient to be impervious to the attacks of Setebos. Therefore he attributes the weaknesses of humanity to design on the part of a creator who would wantonly torment.

His dam held that the Quiet made all things  
Which Setebos vexed only : 'holds not so.  
Who made them weak, meant weakness He might vex.  
Had He meant other, while His hand was in,  
Why not make horny eyes no thorn could prick,  
Or plate my scalp with bone against the snow,  
Or overscale my flesh 'neath joint and joint,  
Like an orc's armour? Ay,—so spoil His sport ! (ll. 170-177.)

(2) Again, and later in the poem, he treats Setebos—or Evil—not merely as a negative aspect of good, but as that which may in time become transmuted into good. He may

Surprise even the Quiet's self  
Some strange day—or, suppose, grow into it  
As grubs grow butterflies. (ll. 246-248.)

(3) One further alternative suggests itself—and this yet more probable—that evil may finally be overcome of good, or may of itself become inoperative.

That some strange day, will either the Quiet catch  
And conquer Setebos, or likelier He  
Decrepit may doze, doze, as good as die. (ll. 281-283.)

Two or three less obvious thoughts may not be omitted in any consideration of a poem containing much which is characteristic of Browning's work wherever found. From the theology of Caliban inevitably results *the doctrine of sacrifice*, though in its lowest, crudest form. Since that condition most likely to excite the wrath of Setebos, as we have already had occasion to notice, is the happiness of his creations, Caliban would, therefore, present himself as a creature full of misery, moaning even in the sun; only in secret rejoicing that he is making Setebos his dupe. Should he be discovered in his deception, in order to avoid the greater evil attendant on the expression of the god's wrath, he would of his own will submit to the lesser ill;

Cut a finger off,  
Or of my three kid yearlings burn the best,  
Or let the toothsome apples rot on tree,  
Or push my tame beast for the orc to taste. (ll. 271-274.)

A sacrifice the outcome of fear. Spare me, and I will do all to appease thy wrath. Into the midst of the meditations of Caliban breaks the thunder-storm, and what he has depicted as a possible event of the future has become a present danger.

White blaze,  
A tree's head snaps—and there, there, there, there, there,  
His thunder follows! Fool to gibe at Him! (ll. 289-291.)

The prospective vows are now made in earnest.

'Lieth flat and loveth Setebos!  
'Maketh his teeth meet through his upper lip,  
Will let those quails fly, will not eat this mouth  
One little mess of whelks, so he may 'scape. (ll. 292-295.)

Sacrifice as distinguished from or opposed to the principle of *self-sacrifice*. Whilst self-sacrifice, self-abnegation, self-suppression—call it what we may—marks the crowning



height of spiritual attainment, scaled alone by the few, and those the pioneers and saviours of the race, all early forms of religion bear witness to the existence of this belief in *sacrifice*—the propitiation of the Deity—as an element inherent in human nature, whether embodied in the legend of Polycrates, in the vow of Jacob at Bethel,<sup>1</sup> or in that condition of his descendants when in accordance with the prophetic denunciation<sup>2</sup> sacrifice had superseded mercy and burnt-offerings constituted a substitute for the knowledge of God. Again and again on different soil, amid men of alien races, the principle of sacrifice is found reappearing throughout history. As the enthusiasm of self-sacrifice becomes enfeebled, by a retrograde process of moral development the barren growth of sacrifice would appear to thrive. The echo of the unquestioning outcry, “God wills it,” had died away when, in the crusading vows of the later era of the movement, expression was too frequently given to the theory of *sacrifice*. How far may the one be regarded as the outcome of the other, the higher the development of the lower instinct? When man has learned

To know even hate is but a mask of love's  
To see a good in evil, and a hope  
In ill-success;<sup>3</sup>

then, too, may the links between sacrifice and self-sacrifice become apparent. Along this line of connection we have to pass in traversing the ground between *Caliban* and *Easter Day*.

And what place does the creed of the unwilling slave of Setebos accord to the *life beyond the grave*? Will the future, if future there be, prove but an indefinite prolongation of

<sup>1</sup> *Genesis*, xxviii, 20.

<sup>2</sup> *Hosea*, vi, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Paracelsus*, 876-878, pt. v.

the present? From the evils of this life the groveller in the mud sees no escape. He has discarded that tenet of his mother's creed which included a theory of retribution after death when Setebos "both plagued enemies and feasted friends." Such theory would indeed have been wholly inconsistent with that which represented the god as indifferent to his creatures, as utterly capricious in his dealings for good or ill—whereby he may be said to have neither enemies nor friends. No, poor Caliban, brutal and selfish, can but hold that "with the life, the pain shall stop." What satisfaction to be derived from the continuance of a loveless existence? Without love, life to the author of *Caliban upon Setebos* would have lost its use, would be fearful of contemplation; the "can it be, and must, and will it?" of *La Saisiaz*<sup>1</sup> finds no faintest echo on Prospero's isle. In the one case the utterances are the utterances of Caliban, in the other those of Browning himself. From the calculations of the one the doctrine of immortality is as inevitably excluded as it is inevitably included in those of the other.

Finally, whilst in the various scattered references to "the Quiet" are to be found some of the most striking evidences of the existence of the artistic element in Caliban's nature—"the something Quiet" which he deems resting "o'er the head of Setebos"

Out of His reach, that feels nor joy nor grief.

. . . . .

[The] stars the outposts of its couch; (ll. 132-138.)

yet far more than this is involved in the suggestions of the relations subsisting between the Quiet and Setebos and the creation to which Caliban belongs. The Quiet too far from Caliban's sphere of existence for him to be in any way

<sup>1</sup> L. 390.

affected by it. He only surmises as to its possible influence upon, and ultimate triumph over, Setebos, who partakes sufficiently of his own nature to call forth fear and enmity, who lives in a proximity to His creations which renders advisable the avoidance of any action calculated to excite His wrath. The Quiet, the impersonation of supreme power, is beyond the reach of all the ills attendant upon this lower phase of existence, hence is equally incapable of experiencing joy and grief, since both alike are relative terms. Although here suggested as incidental to Caliban's reflections, the theory involved is one appearing more or less frequently elsewhere in Browning's work, notably in *A Death in the Desert*, and again in *Cleon*, when it is, however, applied to "the lower and unconscious forms of life." To the Supreme Power beyond man, as to the world of animal life below, is denied "man's distinctive mark," progress. Thus incidentally in these references to the Quiet may be traced a *suggestion foreshadowing* in a degree, however remote, *the necessity of an Incarnation*. Not that this outcome of his theories would appear to have found any place in Caliban's mind; it may possibly indeed be an assumption, wanting sufficient warrant, to assign to Browning himself any definite intention in the matter. Nevertheless, even the suggestion, remote as we may admit it to be, leads up to the argument used by David in *Saul* in the extremity of his anxiety to relieve the sufferings of the object of his affections. Through sympathy alone may suffering be relieved, and genuine sympathy may be best attained through personal experience of suffering. Humanity suffers, but is unequal to the task of aiding effectively its fellow-sufferers. The Deity, whilst possessing the necessary power, is yet untouched by the sympathy resultant from fellow-feeling. A suffering God! Can this be? Only, therefore, through union of the human with the Divine, through

an Incarnation alone, can the relief of human suffering be fully accomplished. Even Caliban feels the need of contact between the Creator and His creatures. The Quiet, incapable of experiencing joy or grief, is also beyond the reach of mortal intercourse or worship. He cannot be God even in the sense in which Setebos is God until, through an approach to His creatures, He experiences something of the sorrows as of the joys of humanity. This in brief is the general course of Browning's arguments for the reasonable necessity of an Incarnation. The suggestion, if suggestion we may call it, here made constitutes the lowest rung in the ladder which leads us to the confession of S. John.

The acknowledgment of God in Christ  
Accepted by thy reason, solves for thee  
All questions in the earth and out of it.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, ll. 474-476.

## LECTURE II

CLEON



## LECTURE II

### CLEON

BETWEEN Caliban and Cleon a wide gulf is fixed : between the savage sprawling in "the pit's much mire," gloating over his powers of inflicting suffering, at once cowering before and insulting his god: and the cultured Greek, inhabitant of "the sprinkled isles," poet, philosopher, artist, musician, sitting in his "portico, royal with sunset," reflecting on the purposes of life, his own achievements and the design of Zeus in creation, which, though inscrutable, he yet must hold to have been beneficent. Could contrast be anywhere more striking than that suggested by these two scenes? And yet amidst outward dissimilarity there is a point towards which all their lines converge. On one subject of reflection alone, this man, the product of Greek intellectual life and culture, has hardly passed beyond that of the savage awakening to a "sense of sense." To both alike death means the end of life, to neither does any glimpse of light reveal itself beyond the grave. And death to the Greek is infinitely more terrible than to the son of Sycorax. To Caliban the belief that "with the life the pain will stop," affords a feeling akin to relief in the present, when the mental discomfort arising from fear of Setebos temporarily

over-powers the physical satisfaction to be derived from basking in the sun. To Cleon, possessed of the capacity for "loving life so over-much," the idea of death affords so terrible a suggestion that its very horror forces upon him at times the necessity of the acceptance of some theory involving belief in the immortality of the soul. Thus we have moved onwards one step, though one step only, in the ladder of thought, of which Caliban's soliloquy constitutes the lowest rung. The inert conjectures, the vague surmises of the savage are succeeded by the reflections and subsequent logical deductions of the man of intellectual culture, culminating in the anguished cry:

I, I the feeling, thinking, acting man.

. . . . .  
Sleep in my urn. It is so horrible,  
I dare at times imagine to my need  
Some future state revealed to us by Zeus.

. . . . .  
. . . . . But no!  
Zeus has not yet revealed it, and alas,  
He must have done so, were it possible!

(*Cleon*, ll. 321-335.)

Different as are the modes of contemplating death, differing as the character and environment of the soliloquist, one is yet in a sense the outcome of the other, an exemplification of Cleon's own assertion:

In man there's failure, only since he left  
The lower and unconscious forms of life. (ll. 125-126.)

. . . . .

Most progress is most failure. (l. 272.)

With the opening out of wider possibilities to the mind comes the consciousness of the gulf between actuality and ideality. To Caliban, whose pleasurable conceptions of life



are bounded by the prospect of defrauding Prospero of his services, lying in the mire

Drinking the mash, with brain become alive,  
Making and marring clay at will; (*Caliban*, ll. 96-97.)

to such a being not long endowed with a capacity for the realization of his own individuality, with the "sense of sense," the Greek appreciation of life is a sheer impossibility. By the mind capable of entering into sympathy with Homer, Terpander, Phidias, the joys of life are felt too keenly to be relinquished without a struggle, and that a bitter one. Death and the grave cast a chilling shadow over the brightness of the present.

Before analysing the arguments contained in the reflections of Cleon, it may be well to inquire what were the influences to which the poet had been subjected, and which resulted in the condition of mind in which the messengers of Protus found him. The Greece in which Cleon lived was the Greece to which S. Paul addressed himself from the Areopagus, the character of which is sufficiently indicated by the circumstances leading to the assembly on that memorable occasion. The Athenians, we are told by the writer of the *Acts*, "spent their time in nothing else but either to tell or to hear some new thing."<sup>1</sup> The age was then, it would appear, not one of action or of practical thought. All had been done in the past that could be done in the departments of artistic achievement, of poetry, of philosophy. Now *creative* power would seem to have disappeared from amongst Greek thinkers, all that remained being the natural restlessness which ultimately succeeds satiety. Much had been accomplished in the past: What remained to the future? It is in accordance with this spirit of the age that Cleon writes to Protus:

<sup>1</sup> *Acts*, xvii, 21.

We of these latter days, with greater mind  
 Than our forerunners, since more composite,  
 Look not so great, beside their simple way,  
 To a judge who only sees one way at once,  
 One mind-point and no other at a time,—  
 Compares the small part of a man of us  
 With some whole man of the heroic age,  
 Great in his way—not ours, nor meant for ours. (ll. 64-71.)

Hence the poet of modern times, though he has left the  
 “epos on [the] hundred plates of gold,” the property of the  
 tyrant Protus, and the little popular song

So sure to rise from every fishing-bark  
 When, lights at prow, the seamen haul their net; (ll. 49, 50.)

yet admits freely that he has not “chanted verse like Homer.” What though he has “combined the moods” of music, “inventing one,” yet has he never “swept string like Terpander,” his predecessor by some seven centuries. What though he has moulded “the image of the sun-god on the phare,” or painted the Pœcile its whole length, yet has he not “carved and painted men like Phidias and his friend”—his forerunners by something like four hundred years. With these mighty achievements in poetry and art of those giants amongst men to be contemplated in retrospect, what hope remains for the future? What greater attainments may be possible to the human intellect? Here again life—this mortal life—would seem to have become all that it is capable of becoming; the powers of mind and body have alike been developed to the full. Thus on this side too is satiety. The yearning for growth, for progress, inherent in human nature, seeks instinctively further heights of attainment. When for the time being all visible peaks appear to have been scaled, then, in the phraseology of S. John, “man [turns] round on himself and stands.”<sup>1</sup> And then arises the enquiry into the

<sup>1</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 498.

purposes of existence, an enquiry unheard in the earlier days of practical activity and struggle. Is this the end of all? No progress being possible along the old tracks, we must hear or see some new thing. The late Dr. Westcott in comparing the dramatic work of Euripides with that of Æschylus, and remarking that Euripides (only a generation younger) had to take account of all the novel influences under which he had grown up, adds, "Once again Asia had touched Europe and quickened there new powers. Greece had conquered Persia only that she might better receive from the East the inspiration of a wider energy."<sup>1</sup> Once more in the days of Cleon might it be said that Asia had touched Europe and quickened there new powers. But this time the positions of conquered and conquerors were reversed. Asia was to conquer Europe, but the conquest effected by the sword of Alexander was to be avenged by weapons forged in another armoury. This time Asia invaded Europe when Paul of Tarsus responded to the appeal "Come over to Macedonia and help us." So far that invasion had borne small fruit: "certain men" had believed, including Dionysius the Areopagite, whilst others, whose attitude Protus would appear to have shared, desired to hear further on the subject of the Resurrection.<sup>2</sup> Cleon is represented as ranking among the sceptics with reference to the new Christian teaching. The special influence of Greek thought upon his philosophy and creed, as expressed in the poem, may be best noticed in a closer consideration to which we now turn.

I. The opening lines (1-18) present, with Browning's usual power of delineation, the environment of the speaker. Cleon, the poet, as well as his correspondent, Protus, the tyrant, seem alike to be imaginary personages. With lines 19-42

<sup>1</sup> *Religious Thought in the West.*

<sup>2</sup> *Acts*, xvii, 34.

the soliloquist at once strikes the key-note of the poem. By the act of munificence which showers gifts upon the poet, "whose song gives life its joy," the king evinces his "recognition of the use of life": and by this recognition proves himself no mere materialist. He is ruling his people, not with exclusive attention to their material needs, though they may not themselves look beyond the gratification of these. Whilst he is building his tower, achieving his life's work, the beauty of which is sufficient to the "vulgar" gaze, he, the builder, is looking "to the East"; and looking to the East in a sense not intended by the Greek when he makes enquiry through his messengers for the "mere barbarian Jew," "one called Paulus."

II. The following section of the poem (ll. 42-157) is an interesting elaboration of Cleon's theory of the development, not only of the individual (Browning's favourite theme), but of the growth of the race. The Greek holds that where individual members of humanity have attained in their several departments to the greatest heights, nothing further *in that direction* is possible of accomplishment. What then remains for the advancement of the race? When the "outside verge that rounds our faculties" has been reached, "these divine men of old" must remain unsurpassed by their successors in that particular department of work or thought.

Where they reached, who can do more than reach?

What then remains? How may the contemporary of Cleon excel "the grand simplicity" of Homer, of Terpander, and in later times of Phidias? It is to the growing complexity of the human mind that Cleon looks for an answer. Although in one intellectual department he may fall short of that which has been attained in the past, he is yet capable of appreciating all that his predecessors have achieved to a

degree impossible to an earlier generation of mankind. *All* the faculties are developed, not one to the exclusion or limitation of the others; hence is obtained a more completely sympathetic union of the intellectual capacities. Thus the further development of the race is to be sought in a greater complexity of being rather than in an advance along any individual line of progress. Three several illustrations of his theory Cleon adduces (1) That suggested by the mosaic-work of the pavement before him: and (2) the more unusual one of the sphere with its contents of air and water: yet again (3) the comparison between the wild and cultivated plant. (1) Each individual section of the mosaic was in itself perfect—thus with the great ones of old. This perfection having been attained, all that should succeed would be at best but a reproduction of the already perfect forms, a repetition, a renewal of that which had gone before. A higher, because more complex beauty might, however, be created by a combination of these separate perfections, producing thus a new form, that, too, perfect in itself. And this synthetic labour must prove an advance on the almost exclusively analytic which had preceded it; since new and more complex forms should be thus evolved, “making at last a picture” of deeper meaning and finer interests than those offered by any number of individual chequers uncombined, however perfect in symmetry and colour. Hence there might still remain a goal towards which human energy should direct its efforts. Though man may have attained to perfection *in part*, to continue the simile, he has now to develop towards the attainment of a perfect *complex whole*, resulting from a composition and adjustment of perfect individual parts, united by a bond of sympathetic intellectual appreciation non-existent in past ages. When Cleon shall have “chanted verse like Homer,” “swept string like Terpander,” “carved and painted men

like Phidias and his friend," then, not only will the individual of recent times have surpassed each of his forerunners in the variety and comprehensiveness of his powers, but he will have attained in each individual department of his being to that greatness for the development of which man's entire faculties were of old required. To this Cleon has by no means yet attained. Such growth, change, and expansion in the individual character is not, he would suggest, readily recognized by the world, and the second illustration here applies: (2) water, the more palpable, material element, is estimated at its worth, whilst air, with its subtler properties,

Tho' filling more fully than the water did ;

though holding

Thrice the weight of water in itself." (ll. 106-107.)

is yet accounted a negligible quantity, and the sphere is pronounced empty. Of the deeper, more subtle, thoughts and workings of the soul in Cleon and his fellows, the outcome of the labours of humanity in past generations, thoughts too deep for expression, ideas only destined to bear fruit in the years to come ; of all these, and such as these, the contemporary world takes little heed. To the gods alone Cleon would refer for his appreciation. With David he would exclaim :

'Tis not what man Does which exalts him, but what man Would do ! <sup>1</sup>

With Ben Ezra he would triumph

All, the world's coarse thumb  
And finger failed to plumb,  
So passed in making up the main account ;  
All instincts immature,  
All purposes unsure,  
That weighed not as his work, yet swelled the man's amount :

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<sup>1</sup> *Saul*, 295.

Thoughts hardly to be packed  
 Into a narrow act,  
 Fancies that broke through language and escaped :  
 All I could never be,  
 All, men ignored in me ;

(“ignored” because incapable of the understanding essential to appreciation) ;

*This, I was worth to God, whose wheel the pitcher shaped.*<sup>1</sup>

For Cleon, equally with the Jewish philosopher of the Middle Ages, accepts the entire subserviency of man to his creator. Both alike recognize the value of life, human life ; its unity, its perfection in itself : both alike realize that this life means growth. “Why stay we on the earth unless to grow ?” asks the Greek. “It was better,” writes the Jew as age approaches,

It was better, youth  
 Should strive, through acts uncouth,  
 Towards making, than repose on aught found made.<sup>2</sup>

Thus progress ! Nevertheless, the Rabbi, whilst recognizing to the full the value of the present life as a thing *per se*, bearing its peculiar uses, its perfect development advancing from youth through manhood until age shall “approve of youth, and death complete the same !” with the *unity* yet recognizes also *continuity* ; and at the close of the old life can stand upon the threshold of the new “fearless and unperplexed,” “what weapons to select, what armour to indue,” for use in the renewed struggle he foresees awaiting him. To the Greek life was equally, nay, surpassingly beautiful, the human faculties equally worthy of cultivation. As in Nature, so with man (and here is employed the third of his illustrations) : (3) the wild flower, *i.e.*, according to his interpretation,

<sup>1</sup> *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, xxiv, xxv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

the possessor of the single artistic faculty—Homer, Terpander, Phidias—

Was the larger; I have dashed  
Rose-blood upon its petals, pricked its cup's  
Honey with wine, and driven its seed to fruit,  
And show a better flower if not so large:  
I stand myself. (ll. 147-151.)

Whilst the Rabbi esteems himself as clay in the hands of the potter, the Greek admits no personal pride in the multiplicity or magnitude of his gifts. All alike he refers to "the gods whose gift alone it is," continuing the reflection—

Which, shall I dare  
(All pride apart) upon the absurd pretext  
That such a gift by chance lay in my hand,  
Discourse of lightly, or depreciate?  
It might have fallen to another's hand: what then?  
(ll. 152-156.)

So far with Ben Ezra. But where the Rabbi can say with confidence

Thence shall I pass, approved  
A man, for aye removed  
From the developed brute: a god though in the germ." (xiii.)

With Arthur

I pass *but shall not die*,  
merely shall I

Thereupon  
Take rest, ere I be gone  
Once more on my adventure brave and new (xiv.)

for the Greek is no such confidence possible. He, too, shall pass—"I pass too surely." His hope, if hope it be, lies in the development of a humanity of the future which shall have profited by the experience of its individual members in the past—"Let at least truth stay!"



Incidentally is introduced in this section of the poem a reference to the yearning of the correspondent of Protus for some revelation of the gods to be made through man to men. Through an Incarnation alone can the purposes of Zeus in creation be fully and comprehensibly revealed to man. Truth may indeed stay, but its revelation is progressive in character; according thus with the nature of the human intelligence (a favourite theme with Browning). For any more complete realization of Truth absolute, a direct revelation of the Deity is essential. God, in man, may show that which it is possible for men to become, hence the design of Zeus in placing him upon earth. So had Cleon "imaged," and "written out the fiction,"

That he or other god descended here  
And, once for all, showed simultaneously  
What, in its nature, never can be shown,  
Piecemeal or in succession ;—showed, I say,  
The worth both absolute and relative  
Of all his children from the birth of time,  
His instruments for all appointed work. (ll. 115-122.)

Through this revelation, too, may be proved the immanence of the Deity, a doctrine even now accepted by the Greek. The speaker on the Areopagus<sup>1</sup> needed only to remind his hearers of this their belief, when he assured them that the God of whom he preached was not one who dwelt in temples made with hands—but is "not far from every one of us," since "in him we live and move and have our being." Even, in the words of Aratus, "we are his offspring." But this theory of an incarnation which "certain slaves" were teaching in a fuller, more satisfying form, than that presented by the imagination of the Greek philosopher, might be to him but "a dream": his sole hope rested, as we have seen, on

<sup>1</sup> *Acts*, xvii, 24-28.

an advance of the race through the higher development of individual members.

No dream, let us hope,  
That years and days, the summers and the springs,  
Follow each other with unwaning powers. (ll. 127-129.)

III. With line 157 we pass to a consideration of the more intensely personal question, yet one involving in its answer much that has gone before; the question put by Protus in the letter accompanying his gifts: is death (which king and poet alike esteem the end of all things), is death to the *man of thought* so fearful a thing in contemplation as it must be to the *man of action*? To Protus, the man of action, who has enjoyed life to the full, whose portion has been wealth, honour, dignity, power, physical and mental appreciation of all the privileges attendant on his station and environment; to the possessor of life such as this death, as not an interruption merely, but as an end to all joy, all gratification, must perforce bring with it nothing but horror. The horror which Browning represents elsewhere as falling momentarily upon the Venetian audience listening to the weird strains of Galuppi's music,<sup>1</sup> when an interpolated discord suggests to the onlooker the question, "What of soul is left, I wonder?" when the pleasures of life are ended? and the answer is given, with its note of hopeless finality, "Dust and ashes." To Protus, too, recurs the answer, "Dust and ashes." Although his work as a ruler has been of that character which has caused him to seek the intellectual and moral, as well as the material welfare of his people (so much we saw Cleon recognizing in his introductory message), yet he regretfully, and probably unjustly, in a moment of depression, estimates his legacy to posterity as "nought."

<sup>1</sup> *A Toccata of Galuppi's.*

My life,  
Complete and whole now in its power and joy,  
Dies altogether with my brain and arm,  
Is lost indeed; since, what survives myself?  
The brazen statue to o'erlook my grave,  
Set on the promontory which I named.  
And that—some supple courtier of my heir  
Shall use its robed and sceptred arm, perhaps,  
To fix the rope to, which best drags it down. (ll. 171-179.)

(An estimate suggesting a truth of practical experience: schemes of absolute government not infrequently bearing within themselves the seeds of their own decay: the "sceptred arm," originally the symbol of its strength, becoming in good sooth the chief agent in the work of destruction.)

To Protus, whose life has been thus spent in activity, forgetfulness seems the one thing most terrible of contemplation. He must pass, and in the words of the dying Alcestis, "who is dead is nought"; of him shall it be said, "He who once was, now is nothing." But for the man whose life "stays in the poems men shall sing, the pictures men shall study," for him may not death prove triumph, since "*thou* dost not go"? Yet Cleon deals with the question as might have been anticipated. Genius, even in its highest form, culture, art, learning, alike fail to satisfy the restless soul, tossed upon the waves of uncertainty, unanchored by any reasonable hope for the future. All these fail where the satisfaction derivative from wealth and power honourably wielded has already failed. The genius ruling in the kingdom of intellectual life has no consolation to offer the sovereign ruling the outer life—the material and moral welfare—of his subjects. Poet and tyrant alike bow before the inevitable approach of death, taking "the tear-stained dust" as proof that "man—the whole man—cannot live again."

The entire poem has been happily designated "the Eccle-

siastes of pagan religion." At the outset we have remarked Cleon admitting that Protus equally with himself has recognized, not only that joy is "the use of life," but that joy may not be found in material gratification alone, but rather in the cultivation of the higher faculties of man.

For so shall men remark, in such an act [*i.e.*, in the munificence displayed  
by the gifts bestowed upon the poet]

Of love for him whose song gives life its joy,

Thy recognition of the use of life. (ll. 20-22.)

The poet had so estimated "joy." It is in truth a higher estimate than that based upon a recognition of material good. Nevertheless, he is now to confess that from this, too, but an empty and transitory satisfaction is obtainable. His answer to Protus affords an analysis of his own reflections on the subject, since the thoughts have clearly not arisen now for the first time. And in the arguments immediately following we cannot but recognize Browning's own voice. The theory advanced is reiterated constantly throughout his writings, dramatic and otherwise. Cleon directs the attention of Protus to the perfections of animal life as created by Zeus in lines suggesting an interesting comparison with that remarkable and frequently quoted passage from the concluding Section of *Paracelsus* (ll. 655-694).

The centre-fire heaves underneath the earth,  
And the earth changes like a human face;

·   ·   ·   ·   ·   ·   ·   ·   ·

The grass grows bright, the boughs are swoln with blooms  
Like chrysalids impatient for the air,  
The shining dorrs are busy, beetles run  
Along the furrows, ants make their ado;  
Above, birds fly in merry flocks, the lark  
Soars up and up, shivering for very joy;  
Afar the ocean sleeps; white fishing-gulls

Flit where the sand is purple with its tribe  
 Of nested limpets; savage creatures seek  
 Their loves in wood and plain—and God renews  
 His ancient rapture. Thus he dwells in all,  
 From life's minute beginnings, up at last  
 To man—the consummation of this scheme  
 Of being, the completion of this sphere  
 Of life: whose attributes had here and there  
 Been scattered o'er the visible world before,  
 Asking to be combined, dim fragments meant  
 To be united in some wondrous whole,  
 Imperfect qualities throughout creation,  
 Suggesting some one creature yet to make,  
 Some point where all those scattered rays should meet  
 Convergent in the faculties of man.

So writes Cleon:

If, in the morning of philosophy,  
 Ere aught had been recorded, nay perceived,  
 Thou, with the light now in thee, could'st have looked  
 On all earth's tenantry, from worm to bird,  
 Ere man, her last, appeared upon the stage—  
 Thou would'st have seen them perfect, and deduced  
 The perfectness of others yet unseen.  
 Conceding which,—had Zeus then questioned thee  
 "Shall I go on a step, improve on this,  
 "Do more for visible creatures than is done?"  
 Thou would'st have answered, "Ay, by making each  
 "Grow conscious in himself—by that alone.  
 "All's perfect else: the shell sucks fast the rock,  
 "The fish strikes through the sea, the snake both swims  
 "And slides, forth range the beasts, the birds take flight,  
 "Till life's mechanics can no further go—  
 "And all this joy in natural life is put  
 "Like fire from off thy finger into each,  
 "So exquisitely perfect is the same." (ll. 187-205.)

But the Teuton of the Renaissance passes beyond the  
 Greek in his history of the evolution of man—as the out-  
 come, the union, the consummation of all that has gone

before. In his description of human nature so evolved, he continues by enumerating power controlled by will, knowledge and love as characteristics, hints and previsions of which

Strewn confusedly about  
The inferior natures—all lead up higher,  
All shape out dimly the superior race,  
The heir of hopes too fair to turn out false,  
And man appears at last.<sup>1</sup>

To Cleon such hopes, but vaguely suggested, leading upwards and onwards towards a recognition of the soul's immortality, are too fair for *truth*, their very beauty leads him to question their reality.

Admitted then that in "all earth's tenantry, from worm to bird," perfection is to be found, in what direction may advance be made? Impossible in degree, it must, therefore, be in kind: some new faculty shall be added to those which man, the latest born of the creatures, shall share in common with his predecessors in the world of animal life—the knowledge and realization of his own individuality.

In due time [after leading the purely animal life] let him critically learn How he lives.

And what shall be the result of the new gift? To him who, inexperienced in its uses, lives "in the morning of philosophy," it must be indicative of an increase of happiness. With the greater fulness of life, resultant from extended knowledge, must surely follow also an extension of enjoyment. But such a belief, says Cleon, living in the eve of philosophy, could have existed only in its morning "ere aught had been recorded." Experience, that prosaic but infallible instructor, has taught man otherwise. The simplicity

<sup>1</sup> *Paracelsus*, v, 709-713.

of mere animal life, though involving not the conscious happiness of a reasoning being (if indeed happiness there be for such) served to impart "the wild joy of living, mere living." A joy from which Caliban was to be found awakening to a realization of his own individuality, and also to a realization that joy and grief are relative terms: that joy, equally with grief, was impossible to the Quiet, the possessor of supreme power, as it was impossible to

Yonder crabs

That march now from the mountain to the sea.<sup>1</sup>

To Cleon, oppressed by a profound sense of discouragement in life, the cynical suggestion presents itself that the semi-conscious vegetating existence of the animal may be more desirable than the yearnings and aspirations inevitably attendant on human life, with its joys keen and intensified, but, alas! all too brief.

Thou king, hadst more reasonably said:

"Let progress end at once,—man make no step

"Beyond the natural man, the better beast,

"Using his senses, not the sense of sense." (ll. 221-224.)

It is a purely pagan view of life.

In man there's failure, only since he left

The lower and unconscious forms of life. (ll. 225-226.)

So man grew, and his widening intelligence opened out vast and ever-increasing possibilities of joy. But with the realization of possibilities came also the consciousness of his limitations. So long as the flesh had remained absolutely paramount, the restrictions it was capable of imposing upon the workings of the soul had been unfelt. Now, when the soul has climbed its watch-tower and perceives

<sup>1</sup> *Caliban*, 101.

A world of capability  
 For joy, spread round about us, meant for us,  
 Inviting us.

When at this moment the soul in its yearning "craves all,"  
 then is the time of the flesh to reply,

Take no jot more  
 Than ere thou clombst the tower to look abroad!  
 Nay, so much less as that fatigue has brought  
 Deduction to it. (ll. 239-245.)

In other words, the ever-recurring conflict between flesh and spirit. In human nature, as at present constituted, one is bound to suffer at the expense of the other; the sound mind in the sound body is unfortunately a counsel of perfection too rarely attainable in practical life. The poet is conscious of the growing vitality of the spirit as well as that of the intellect (although he does not admittedly recognize that this is so, his use of the term "soul" being seemingly synonymous with "intellect"), the decreasing power of the flesh. In vain the struggle to

Supply fresh oil to life,  
 Repair the waste of age and sickness. (ll. 248-249.)

Thus the fate of the man of genius, of keener perceptions, of wider capacities for enjoyment, becomes proportionately more grievous than that of the less complex nature of the man of action.

Say rather that my fate is deadlier still,  
 In this, that every day my sense of joy  
 Grows more acute, my soul (intensified  
 By power and insight) more enlarged, more keen;  
 While every day my hairs fall more and more,  
 My hand shakes, and the heavy years increase—  
 The horror quickening still from year to year,  
 The consummation coming past escape  
 When I shall know most, and yet least enjoy. (ll. 309-317.)



A recognition of the emptiness of life, necessarily hopeless when thus viewed in relation to its sensuous and intellectual possibilities only. To these things the end must come. Thus Browning leads us on, as so frequently elsewhere, to an admission of *the inevitableness of immortality*.

An estimate of life curiously opposed to this simple pagan aspect is that afforded by the conception of *Paracelsus*, a poem containing no small element of the mysticism which offered so powerful an attraction to its author. In a familiar passage at the close of the First Section we find Paracelsus describing the methods he proposes to pursue in his search for truth; truth which he deems existent within the soul of man, and acquired by no external influence.

Truth is within ourselves; it takes no rise  
From outward things, whate'er you may believe.  
There is an inmost centre in us all,  
Where truth abides in fulness; and around,  
Wall upon wall, the gross flesh hems it in,  
This perfect, clear perception—which is truth.  
A baffling and perverting carnal mesh  
Binds it, and makes all error: and to KNOW  
Rather consists in opening out a way  
Whence the imprisoned splendour may escape,  
Than in effecting entry for a light  
Supposed to be without.<sup>1</sup>

. . . . .

See this soul of ours!  
How it strives weakly in the child, is loosed  
In manhood, clogged by sickness, back compelled  
By age and waste, set free at last by death.<sup>2</sup>

In S. John's reflections in *A Death in the Desert*, a similar suggestion of mysticism is modified by the medium through which it has passed. The Christian teacher who

<sup>1</sup> *Paracelsus*, i, 726-737.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, i, 759-762.

wrote that "God is Love," and that in the knowledge of this truth immortality itself consists, propounds for himself a question similar to that which has so hopeless a ring when issuing from the mouth of the Greek.

Is it for nothing we grow old and weak?

A suggestion of the character of the answer is found in the conclusion of the question, "We whom God loves."

Can they share  
—They, who have flesh, a veil of youth and strength  
About each spirit, that needs must bide its time,  
Living and learning still as years assist  
Which wear the thickness thin, and let man see—  
With me who hardly am withheld at all,  
But shudderingly, scarce a shred between,  
Lie bare to the universal prick of light?<sup>1</sup>

True is the lament of the reply to Protus.

We struggle, fain to enlarge  
Our bounded physical reciprocity,  
Increase our power, supply fresh oil to life,  
Repair the waste of age and sickness. (ll. 244-247.)

All too true. But if, as we are assured, there is no waste in Nature, whence comes the apparent destruction wrought by age and sickness? What the design of which it is the evidence? In the words of the Christian mystic, but to admit "the universal prick of light," to effect the union of the individual soul with that central fire of which it is an emanation; when the training and development inseparable from suffering shall have done their work, since "when pain ends, gain ends too."

Thy body at its best,  
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way?<sup>2</sup>

The decay, it must be, of its temporal habitation which

<sup>1</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 198-207.

<sup>2</sup> *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, viii.

shall bring to the soul eternal freedom. To the Greek, on the other hand, with the decay of the body, passed not only all that made life worth living, but the life itself. The keener the appreciation of life, the harder, therefore, the parting of soul from body. He, indeed,

Sees the wider but to sigh the more.

“Most progress is most failure.” Failure absolute if death is the end of life; failure relative and indicative of higher, vaster potentialities of being, if that dream of a moment’s yearning might be true, if death prove itself but “the throbbing impulse” to a fuller life; if, freed by it, man bursts “as the worm into the fly,” becoming a creature of that future state

Unlimited in capability  
For joy, as this is in desire for joy.

But to the Greek the door of actuality remains fast closed.

Before concluding an examination of this section of the poem which has suggested, as was inevitable, a comparison between the pagan and the Christian conception of life; between an estimate into which physical and intellectual considerations alone enter, and that in which spiritual also find place, it may not be unprofitable to recall the method by which Browning has treated the same subject elsewhere, in a different connection. *Old Pictures in Florence*, published originally in the volume of the *Men and Women Series*, which likewise contained *Cleon*, is one of the few poems in which the author may be assumed to speak in his own person. The contrast there drawn is that between the products of Greek Art which “ran and reached its goal,” and the works of the mediaeval Italian artists. Having pointed to the Greek statuary, to the figures of Theseus, of

Apollo, of Niobe, and Alexander, the speaker recognizes therein a re-utterance of

The Truth of Man, as by God first spoken,  
Which the actual generations garble,  
. . . Soul (which Limbs betoken)  
And Limbs (Soul informs) made new in marble.<sup>1</sup>

Here all is perfection, man sees himself as he wishes he were, as he "might have been," as he "cannot be." In such finished work no room is left for "man's distinctive mark," progress,—growth. When, then, according to Browning, did growth once more begin? When was the depression of Cleon's day out-lived? Vitality, he asserts, once more became apparent when the eye of the artist was turned from externals to that which externals may denote or conceal, not outwards but inwards, from the form betokening the existence of Soul to Soul itself. The mediaeval painters started on a new and endless path of progress when in answer to the cry of

Greek Art, and what more wish you?

they replied,

To become now self-acquainters,  
And paint man man, whatever the issue!  
Make new hopes shine through the flesh they fray,  
New fears aggrandize the rags and tatters:  
To bring the invisible full into play!  
Let the visible go to the dogs—what matters?<sup>2</sup>

Browning's estimate of Art, as of all departments of work, was necessarily one which would lead him to sympathize with that form which strives, however imperfectly, to bring "the invisible full into play," though the achievement must be effected, not by neglect of, but rather by the fullest

<sup>1</sup> *Old Pictures in Florence*, xi.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xix.

treatment of the visible. The avowed function of Art, in the most comprehensive acceptation of the term, was with him to achieve "no mere imagery on the wall," but to present something, whether in Music, Poetry, or Painting, which should

Mean beyond the facts,  
Suffice the eye and save the soul beside.<sup>1</sup>

The more distinctive artistic function (commonly so accepted) of gratifying the senses is not to be neglected, although it may not—as with the Greek—be cultivated to the exclusion, whole or partial, of that which is in its essence more enduring. The monkish painter (1412-69), whilst defending his realistic methods, yet perceives in vision the immensity of possible achievement if he "drew higher things with the same truth." To work thus were "to take the Prior's pulpit-place, interpret God to all of you."<sup>2</sup> In so far, then, as he strives towards this realization of the spiritual, the early Italian painter holds, according to Browning, higher place in the ranks of the artistic hierarchy than the Greek who had attained already to perfection in his particular department, feeling that "where he had reached who could do more than reach?" No such perfection of attainment was possible to him who would "bring the invisible full into play." His glory lay rather "in daring so much before he well did it." Thus

The first of the new, in our race's story,  
Beats the last of the old.<sup>3</sup>

As with the artist, so with the spectator, growth had only begun when

Looking [his] last on them all,  
[He] turned [his] eyes inwardly one fine day

<sup>1</sup> *The Book and the Ring*, 866-867.

<sup>2</sup> *Fra Lippo Lippi*.

<sup>3</sup> *Old Pictures in Florence*, xx.

And cried with a start—What if we so small  
 Be greater and grander the while than they?  
 Are they perfect of lineament, perfect of stature?  
 In both, of such lower types are we  
 Precisely because of our wider nature;  
 For time, theirs—ours, for eternity.<sup>1</sup>

. . . . .  
 They are perfect—how else? they shall never change:  
 We are faulty—why not? we have time in store.  
 The Artificer's hand is not arrested  
 With us; we are rough-hewn, nowise polished.<sup>2</sup>

Bitter as is to Cleon the realization that "What's come to perfection perishes," to the Christian artist the same axiom serves but as incentive to more strenuous effort. In imperfection he recognizes the germ of future progress.

The help whereby he mounts,  
 The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,  
*Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.*<sup>3</sup>

As imperfection suggests progress, so to "the heir of immortality" is failure but a step towards ultimate attainment. With confidence he may inquire

What is our failure here but a triumph's evidence<sup>4</sup>  
 For the fulness of the days?

The Greek, with his bounded horizon, realizes but the first aspect of the truth: that

In man there's failure, only since he left  
 The lower and unconscious forms of life.

That

Most progress is most failure.

The horizon being bounded by the grave, progress cut short

<sup>1</sup> *Old Pictures in Florence*, xv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xvi.

<sup>3</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 429-431.

<sup>4</sup> *Abt Vogler*, xi.

by the approach of death, failure may become failure absolute, irremediable. What wonder, then, that the horror should "quicken still from year to year"; until the very terror itself demands relief in the imaginative creation of a future state. But for this there is no warrant; for the Greek all attainable satisfaction must be sought through the present phase of existence alone.

IV. Cleon's answer to the question of Protus with regard to Death's aspect to the man of thought, whose works outlast his personal existence (ll. 274-335), is but an utterance of the cry of human nature in all times and in all places. Individuality must be preserved! In a moment of artistic fervour the poet may acquiesce in the fate by which his friend has become "a portion of the loveliness which once he made more lovely,"<sup>1</sup> but such acquiescence can only hold good where poetic imagination has overborne human affection. The soul of the man first, the poet afterwards, demands that

Eternal form shall still divide  
Eternal soul from all beside,

and that

I shall *know* him when we meet.<sup>2</sup>

And what he claims for his friend, man requires also for himself. The individual soul, as at present constituted, cannot conceive of divesting itself of its own individuality, of becoming "merged in the general whole." As easy almost is it to conceive of annihilation. In hours of abstract thought such theories may be evolved, and in accordance with the mental constitution of the thinker, be rejected or honestly accepted; but when brought face to face with the

<sup>1</sup> *Adonais*, Shelley.

<sup>2</sup> *In Memoriam*, xlvii.

issues of Life and Death, the heart, freeing itself from the trammels of intellectual sophistries, cries out, "I have felt"; and yearns for a creed which shall allow acceptance of a tenet involving future recognition and reunion, hence, by implication, preservation of individuality, and identity. Whatever his nominal creed, experience teaches us that man at supreme moments of life craves for some such satisfaction as this.

It is, indeed, the Greek, materialist here rather than artist, who points out to Protus that, in his estimate of the joy of leaving "living works behind," he confounds "the accurate view of what joy is with feeling joy." Confounds

The knowing how  
And showing how to live (my faculty)  
With actually living. Otherwise  
Where is the artist's vantage o'er the king?  
Because in my great epos I display  
How divers men young, strong, fair, wise, can act—  
Is this as though I acted? If I paint,  
Carve the young Phoebus, am I therefore young?  
Methinks I'm older that I bowed myself  
The many years of pain that taught me art!

. . . . .  
. . . . .

I know the joy of kingship: well, thou art king! (ll. 281-300.)

All the Greek love of life, of physical beauty is here, intensified by the consciousness of the brief and transitory character of its existence. If death ends all things, then the poet and philosopher, whilst acquiring the knowledge "how to live," has sacrificed the power of living. Yet a sacrifice even greater than this is enthusiastically welcomed by the Grammarian of the Revival of Learning, greater since in this case the devotion of a lifetime leaves behind it no monument of fame. Yet, having counted the cost,



Oh! such a life as he resolved to live,  
When he had learned it.

· · · · ·  
· *Sooner, he spurned it.*<sup>1</sup>

We can almost detect the voice of Cleon in the urgency of the student's contemporaries. "Live now or never," since "time escapes." In the reply lies the clue to the immensity of difference between the two positions—

Leave Now for dogs and apes!  
Man has Forever.<sup>2</sup>

In the one instance, life being lived in the light of the "Forever," it is possible to perceive with Pompilia that "No work begun shall ever pause for death":<sup>3</sup> and life, whatever its trials and limitations, becomes to the believer in immortality very well worth the living. Thus the Christian conception of human life transcends the pagan as the designs of the Italian painters surpass in their suggestive inspiration the perfection of the more purely technical achievements of Greek art. The whole discussion is so peculiarly characteristic of Browning's work that it seemed impossible to omit this comparison in the present connection, even though we shall be again obliged to revert to the Grammarian, and the theory exemplified in his history, in analyzing the defence of Bishop Blougram.

In passing, then, to the concluding section of Cleon's reply to Protus, we are met by no exclusively Greek utterance; the voice is the voice of humanity unfettered by limitations of race or mental training.

"But," sayest thou . . .  
· · · · · "What  
"Thou writest, paintest, stays; that does not die:

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<sup>1</sup> *A Grammarian's Funeral.*

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Pompilia*, 1787.

“Sappho survives, because we sing her songs,  
 “And Æschylus, because we read his plays!”  
 Why, if they live still, let them come and take  
 Thy slave in my despite, drink from thy cup,  
 Speak in my place. Thou diest while I survive? (ll. 301-308.)

It is self-abnegation, carried to an extent rendering impossible the preservation of the race, which can look to happiness, or even to satisfaction, in the prospect of annihilation so long as posterity shall enjoy the fruits of a life of labour—which may express all its yearnings towards immortality in the petition:

O may I join the choir invisible  
 Of those immortal dead who live again  
 In minds made better by their presence: . . .  
 . . . . .  
*So to live is heaven:*  
 . . . . .  
*This is life to come*  
 Which martyred men have made more glorious  
 For us who strive to follow. May I reach  
 That purest heaven . . .  
 . . . . .  
 Be the sweet presence of a good diffused,  
 And in diffusion ever more intense.

Yet the mind which originated these nobly philosophic lines found it impossible to continue literary work when severed from the human comradeship and sympathy, criticism and inspiration to which the heart, even more than the brain, had grown accustomed. After the death of Mr. G. H. Lewes we are told—in the author's own words—that “The writing seems all trivial stuff,” . . . and that work is resorted to as “a means of saving the mind from imbecility.”<sup>1</sup> We

<sup>1</sup> *Life of George Eliot*, Cross. Letters to J. Blackwood and J. W. Cross.

shall find Browning himself refusing, in the hour of bereavement, to admit the satisfaction to be derived from a contemplation of the progress of the race through individual sacrifice and loss of personal identity; the satisfaction of the knowledge that

Somewhere new existence led by men and women new,  
Possibly attains perfection coveted by me and you;

[Whilst we] working ne'er shall know if work bear fruit.  
Others reap and garner—

We, creative thought, must cease  
In created word, thought's echo, due to impulse long since sped!

Poor is the comfort

There's ever someone lives although ourselves be dead.<sup>1</sup>

Something more than this, more even than "the thought of what was" is demanded for the satisfaction of the soul, yet this is all the Greek has to offer to his correspondent.

Before leaving this section of the poem, one further comparison of striking interest claims at least a brief consideration—a comparison also of the life of the man of action with that of the man of thought: of Salinguerra, the Ghibelline leader and Sordello, the poet and dreamer, Ghibelline by antecedents, Guelph by conviction; the visionary and dreamer, but the dreamer whose dreams should remain a legacy to posterity, the visionary who held that "the poet must be earth's essential king." The comparison is especially interesting, since in this case also it is drawn (Bk. iv) by the poet himself. To Sordello, however, the recognition of a future existence has at times a very potent influence upon the present. For him, moreover, in his moments of insight, *service* not *happiness*, is the inspiration of life. Lofty as is the

<sup>1</sup> *La Saïsiaz*.

estimation in which he holds the office of poet, he yet deems Salinguerra

One of happier fate, and all I should have done,  
He does; the people's good being paramount  
With him.<sup>1</sup>

Here is

A nature made to serve, excel  
In serving, only feel by service well!<sup>2</sup>

To the poet of the Middle Ages then, as to the Greek, though for different reasons, the man of action has the happier fate. But where the Greek shudders before the approach of death, the Italian issues triumphantly from the final struggle of life—the supreme temptation—through the realization

That death, I fly, revealed  
So oft a better life this life concealed,  
And which sage, champion, martyr, through each path  
Have hunted fearlessly.<sup>3</sup>

Only he would crave the consciousness which served as inspiration to sage, champion, martyr, and he, too, will hunt death fearlessly, will demand, "Let what masters life disclose itself!"

V. The concluding lines of the poem (336-353) contain a curiously suggestive contrast between the influences of an effete pagan culture, and of Christianity in its infancy. On the one hand, the Greek philosopher surrounded by evidences of marvellous physical and intellectual achievements, admitting the experience of an overwhelming horror, in face of the approach of "a deadly fate." On the other hand, "a mere barbarian Jew" and "certain slaves," pioneers of that faith which should offer solution to the problems before

<sup>1</sup> *Sordello*, bk. iv.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. v.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, bk. vi.

which Greek learning shrank confessedly powerless. A contrast between two stages of that development in the life of man, indicated by the theory of St. John's teaching, given in the interpolated note introductory to the main arguments of *A Death in the Desert*:

The doctrine he was wont to teach,  
How divers persons witness in each man,  
Three souls which make up one soul.

(1) The lower or animal life, distinguished as "What Does," (2) The intellect inspiring which "useth the first with its collected use," and is defined as "What Knows," that which *Cleon* calls Soul. (3) Finally, the union of both for the service of the third and highest element, which is in itself capable of existence apart from either:

Subsisting whether they assist or no,

designated as "What Is," that which *Browning* calls Soul in *Old Pictures in Florence*.

Life, in the person of Cleon, would appear to have reached the second of the stages thus [distinguished—physical development, combined with intellectual pre-eminence, marking "an age of light, light without love." With Paulus life has passed beyond, and the spiritual energy has attained to its position of predominance over the lower elements constituting this Trinity of human nature. The barbarian Jew heralds a new phase in the world's history. The entire conclusion may well serve as commentary on the lines already quoted from *Old Pictures in Florence*:

The first of the new in our race's story  
Beats the last of the old.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. *St. Matthew*, xi, 11.



## LECTURE III

BISHOP BLOUGRAM'S APOLOGY





## LECTURE III

### BISHOP BLOUGRAM'S APOLOGY

IN *Bishop Blougram's Apology* we are afforded yet another striking illustration of Browning's methods of working by means of dramatic machinery. On some occasions we have already found him relying on the arguments of his imaginary soliloquists to support an apparently favourite theory, on others we have noticed him employing these arguments to expose the weak points of a system of which he personally disapproves. More rarely two conflicting theories are placed side by side, the decision as to the author's own relation to either being left to the judgment of the reader. Thus with the Bishop and the Journalist of the present instance—who may assert with confidence to which side Browning's sympathies incline? How are we to judge of his actual feelings in the case? Would he hold up to severer opprobrium the representative of honest scepticism or the advocate of opportunism? Does he intend us to accept the scepticism of the Journalist as genuine, the justification of the Bishop as offered in entire good faith? Do his sympathies indeed belong wholly to either side? To hold that he necessarily sets forth a direct expression of his own opinions is to misunderstand the spirit in which he is accustomed to approach his subject. As well believe Caliban

to give utterance to his conception of a Supreme Being as the personification of irresponsible and capricious power; and Cleon to estimate his recognition of Christianity as "a doctrine to be held by no sane man."

This and the two foregoing dramatic poems have been chosen as leading step by step from the earlier and cruder forms of religious belief, to the later and more complex: before approaching the debatable ground of *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, and the unquestionably personal expression of feeling in *La Saisiaz*. A wide gulf seemed indeed, at first sight, to be fixed between Caliban and Cleon, but yet wider is the actually existent distance dividing Cleon from Blougram. Less marked the change in outward circumstances, the inherent difference becomes the more striking. The beauties of Greek art and culture are but replaced by the nineteenth century luxury surrounding a dignitary of the Roman Catholic Church. "Greek busts, Venetian paintings, Roman walls, and English books . . . bound in gold"; the central figures, the Bishop and his companion dallying with the pleasures of the table, discoursing of momentous truths over the wine and olives. Surely the distance between this and Cleon is less to traverse than that between the Greek, surrounded by the proofs of the munificence of Protus, and Caliban revelling in his mire. The superficial difference less, the inherent difference so wide that the idea at first suggested itself of taking as an intermediate and connecting link the poem immediately preceding this in the collected edition of the works, *The Bishop orders his Tomb at Saint Praxed's Church*. On more mature consideration it would seem, however, that the prelate of the nineteenth century sufficiently approaches the type of the Renaissance churchman to render the added link unnecessary. All, therefore, that remains for consideration before analyzing the Bishop's

Apology, is a brief survey of the changes effected in the outlook of the civilized world, in so far as they relate to the subject before us, during the eighteen centuries which had elapsed between the letter of Cleon to Protus and the monologue of Blougram addressed to the unfortunate owner of the name of Gigadibs. In the first century of the Christian era in which Cleon wrote, the Greek world had, as we have noticed, come into contact with Christianity only at its extreme edge: to Cleon, student and representative of Greek philosophic thought, its tenets were impossible of credence. The difficulty of faith *then* was that involved in the acceptance of any formulated theory which should include an assertion of the immortality of the soul and its future state of existence. The difficulties which demand the defence of Blougram are of a character wholly different. Christianity has become the creed of the civilized world: during the intervening centuries the simplicity of the mediaeval faith has given place to the more logical reasoning following the freedom of thought which accompanied the Renaissance; whilst this has, in its turn, been superseded by the more purely critical attitude of mind, resulting in the scepticism, and consequent casuistry, attendant on the dogmatism of the earlier years of the nineteenth century. The Bishop's definition of his position is sufficiently descriptive of the situation. He is put upon his defence, in truth, solely on account of the peculiar conditions of the environment in which his lot has fallen. Three centuries earlier who would have questioned the genuineness of his faith? Twice as many decades later who would require that his acceptance of the creed he professes should be implicit and detailed? His defence is made merely before the tribunal of his fellow men; the character of this tribunal having changed from the warmth of unquestioning faith to the

barren coldness of scepticism, the nature of the attack has likewise changed.

Your picked twelve, you'll find,  
 Profess themselves indignant, scandalized  
 At thus being unable to explain  
 How a superior man who disbelieves  
 May not believe as well: that 's Schelling's way!  
 It 's through my coming in the tail of time,  
 Nicking the minute with a happy tact.  
 Had I been born three hundred years ago  
 They'd say, "What 's strange? Blougram of course believes;"  
 And, seventy years since, "disbelieves of course."  
 But now, "He may believe; and yet, and yet  
 "How can he?" All eyes turn with interest. (ll. 407-418.)

I, the man of sense and learning too,  
 The able to think yet act, the this, the that,  
 I, to believe at this late time of day!  
 Enough; you see, I need not fear contempt. (ll. 428-431.)

In short, the Bishop's is a figure claiming the interest of his contemporaries in that his position is one not readily definable: he may be a saint and a whole-hearted churchman; it is yet more probable, so says the world, that his conventional orthodoxy may be but the cloak of an underlying scepticism.

The identity of Bishop Blougram with Cardinal Wiseman was, as every one knows, established from the first. That this should have been so was inevitable from the various external indications introduced with obvious intention into the poem; to the unprejudiced student it does not, however, appear equally inevitable that the character sketch thus outlined should be commonly estimated as conceived in a spirit hostile to the original. Yet such would seem to be the case. In his *Browning Cyclopaedia*, Dr. Berdoe quotes from a review contributed to *The Rambler* of January, 1856,

"which," he adds, "is credibly supposed to have been written by the Cardinal himself." This article referred to the Bishop's portrait as "that of an arch-hypocrite and the frankest of fools." Apparently accepting this criticism, the author of the *Cyclopaedia* not unnaturally observes that "it is necessary to say that the description is to the last degree untrue, as must have been obvious to any one personally acquainted with the Cardinal." A similar opinion is expressed by no less an authority than Mr. Wilfrid Ward, who characterizes the portrait as "quite unlike all that Wiseman's letters and the recollections of his friends show him to have been. Subtle and true as the sketch is in itself, it really depicts someone else."<sup>1</sup> Is this so? May it not rather be the case that the true character of Browning's prelate has not been fairly estimated? Does the Bishop occupy the position assigned him by Mr. Ward when he continues, "Blougram acquiesces in the judgment that Catholicism and Christianity are doubtful, and yet that they are no more provable as false than as true; that in one mood they seem true, in another false; that either the moods of faith or the moods of doubt may prove to correspond with the truth, and that in this state of things circumstances and external advantage may be allowed to decide his vocation, and to justify him in professing consistently as true, what in his heart of hearts he only regards as possible?"<sup>2</sup> Again, "The sceptical element which had tried Wiseman in his early years was something wholly different from Blougram's scepticism."<sup>3</sup> Is there not something more than this to be said for the Bishop's Apology? It is, indeed, the main difficulty of the poem to decide to what extent the speaker is, or is not, serious in his assertions; but if we come to the conclusion that he is either "an arch-

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*, by Wilfrid Ward. 2 vols. 1897.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

hypocrite," or "the frankest of fools," we shall assuredly be very far from having read the defence aright. Browning himself has, according to report, had something to say on this subject.<sup>1</sup> When accused by Sir Charles Gavin Duffy and Mr. John Forster of abhorrence of the Roman Catholic faith on the grounds of the then recent publication of this poem, containing, as was alleged, a portrait of a sophistical and self-indulgent priest, intended as a satire on Cardinal Wiseman, Browning met the charge with what would appear to have been genuine astonishment; and, whilst admitting his intention of employing the Cardinal as a model, concluded, "But I do not consider it a satire, there is nothing hostile about it." And, looked at more closely, it is questionable whether much of the alleged hostility is to be detected. At least our feelings towards the Bishop contain no element of either aversion or contempt as we conclude our study of his defence!

The external indications of identity are scattered, as if incidentally, throughout the poem, according to the method habitual to Browning. (1) Cardinal in 1850, Wiseman had been already consecrated bishop in 1840, and sent to England as Vicar Apostolic of the Central District in conjunction with Bishop Walsh. The year of his appointment as Cardinal was also the date of the papal bull assigning territorial titles to Roman Catholic bishops in England, a measure, rightly or wrongly, attributed popularly to the influence of Wiseman. His episcopal title from 1840 had been that of "Melipotamus in *partibus infidelium*," hence

Sylvester Blougram, styled in *partibus*  
*Episcopus, nec non*—(the deuce knows what  
 It's changed to by our novel hierarchy). (ll. 972-974.)

<sup>1</sup> Incident related *Browning*. G. K. Chesterton. (*Eng. Men of Letters*.)

(2) The reference in lines 957-960 to the Bishop's influence in the literary world, in particular with the editors of Reviews, "whether here, in Dublin or New York," recalls the fact that *The Dublin Review* had been founded by Cardinal Wiseman in 1836.

(3) Again, in the opening lines, the allusion to Augustus Welby Pugin, the genius of ecclesiastical architecture of the last century. When Wiseman, in 1840, became President of Oscott College, Pugin was alarmed for the results of his influence in architectural matters; since the Cardinal's tastes had been formed in Rome, whilst the design of Pugin included a Gothic revival in ecclesiastical architecture and vestments, as well as the universal adoption of Gregorian chants in the services of the Church. In spite, however, of the architect's fears, and some preliminary collisions, the two men subsequently succeeded in preserving amicable relations. Hence the Bishop's tolerant, but half-satirical comment,

We ought to have our Abbey back, you see.  
It's different, preaching in basilicas,  
And doing duty in some masterpiece  
Like this of brother Pugin's, bless his heart!  
I doubt if they're half-baked, those chalk rosettes,  
Ciphers and stucco-twiddlings everywhere. (ll. 3-8.)

(4) Any considerations of internal evidences, especially those touching the question of scepticism, will necessarily be repeated in following the Bishop's arguments: but it may be well to refer briefly in this place to the most noted characteristics of the Cardinal as estimated by the contemporary world.

(a) By some, even among his own clergy, he is reported to have been opposed on account of his ultramontane tendencies and innovating zeal, in particular with regard to the introduction of sacred images into the churches, and the

adoption of certain devotional exercises not hitherto in use amongst English members of the Roman Catholic community. Thus we find the Bishop asserting, "I . . .

. . . would die rather than avow my fear  
The Naples' liquefaction may be false,  
When set to happen by the palace-clock  
According to the clouds or dinner-time. (ll. 727-730.)

Browning thus suggests the fact obvious to the world at large,—the apparently implicit acceptance by the Cardinal of miracles which to the average mind are impossible of credence; at the same time he allows opportunity for an explanation of the position: the prelate fears the effect upon the main articles of his faith of questioning that which is least.

First cut the Liquefaction, what comes last  
But Fichte's clever cut at God himself? (ll. 743-744.)

(*b*) Whilst, however, preserving these extreme views with regard to the position and tenets of the Church, the Cardinal, with statesmanlike wisdom, recognized that, in accordance with its genius as implied in the attribute Catholic, it must likewise keep pace with the intellectual advance of the age, not holding aloof from, but, where possible, assimilating the highest results of contemporary thought. Now it is easy to perceive that the onlooker of that day may have found these apparently conflicting tendencies in the Cardinal's mind difficult of reconciliation, and only to be accounted for by the supposition already suggested that the man capable of assuming such an attitude towards his creed must be, if not a fool, then an arch-hypocrite. It has been the work of Browning to show how, without detriment to his intellectual capacity, the Bishop may justify his position. To what extent, if at all,



his moral character is affected thereby must depend upon the degree of sincerity which we allow to the entire exposition.

It is no part of the present plan to attempt a vindication of Browning's treatment of the character of Cardinal Wiseman; the issues suggested by the Apology lie deeper, and are far broader than those involved in such a discussion. One object, at least, of the design would appear to be that of a defence of belief in those tenets of a creed which transcend the powers of reason; the particular religious body to which the speaker belongs being of little import to the real issue. It seemed, however, that any treatment of the poem would be incomplete which did not contain some brief comparison such as has been here attempted. And even now there is danger lest the attempt may prove misleading. Whether or not Browning has given us the true character of the Cardinal is not the question; the only fact in that connection which we shall do well to bear in mind is that, working from the materials at his command—the outward and visible manifestations afforded by Wiseman's life as known to his contemporaries—the author of the Apology has given what may be a possible interpretation of character, sufficiently reasonable, at any rate, to account for, and to reconcile seeming inconsistencies, without laying its owner open to the charge of either folly or knavery.

In approaching a more detailed examination of the poem we must not neglect to take into account the peculiar conditions of religious life and thought prevailing in England at the time of the publication, 1855. Fourteen years earlier had appeared the celebrated No. 90 of *Tracts for the Times*. After an interval of six years, in 1847, had followed the secession of J. H. Newman to the Church of Rome, in 1853 that of Cardinal Manning. It was a time of anxiety and sorrow amongst all those most deeply attached to the Church

of England, and of general unrest and uneasiness throughout the country. Sufficient evidence of the universal unsettlement and anxiety is afforded by the alarm, amounting almost to panic, excited by the Bull of 1850 announcing the territorial titles scheme. In a letter to Dean Stanley on the question of the Oxford University Reform Bill of 1854, Mr. Gladstone wrote, "The very words which you have let fall upon your paper 'Roman Catholics,' used in this connection (*i.e.*, of extending full University privileges to students other than members of the Church of England) were enough to burn it through and through, considering we have a parliament which, *were the measure of 1829 not law at this moment, would, I think, probably refuse to make it law.*"<sup>1</sup> Such was the spirit of the times in England at the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century, and the existence of this spirit must not be left out of account in dealing with Bishop Blougram and his Apology.

That Browning did not wholly escape its influence, even though removed from direct contact, is readily conceivable. And in spite of his own expressed surprise at the suggestion that he did not favourably regard the Roman Catholic creed, his natural sympathies would certainly appear to have inclined towards a Puritanic form of worship rather than to a more ornate ritual; setting aside questions of doctrine of which these may be the outward manifestations. This being the case, ample reason is at once discoverable for the resolve to examine the position more thoroughly, ascertaining how far it was possible to make out a case for the other side. For, whilst on the one hand, we have every right, despite his cosmopolitanism and his Italian sympathies to claim the author of the *Apology* as a genuine Englishman, with a fair proportion of the Englishman's characteristics, on the other

<sup>1</sup> *Life of Gladstone.* J. Morley. Vol. i.

hand, we may exonerate him, if not wholly, yet to a very large extent, from insular prejudices and narrow-minded judgments. Had he designed to present Blougram either as fool or hypocrite, he might assuredly have attained his object with equal certainty by writing something less than the thousand and odd lines devoted to the work of psychological analysis: for, in making his defence, the Bishop is likewise revealing himself—to him who has eyes to see. Here, as elsewhere, it is Browning's intent to present to his readers not what man sees but "what *this* man sees"; to lead them to judge of cause rather than of effect, of motive rather than of action, or of action by the recognition of motive. We may attempt to classify his characters, if we will: a Browning society may write and read papers on the "villains" or the "hypocrites" of Browning as distinguished from his saints. Such a classification is perhaps fairly possible in the case of a character delineator such as Dickens, whose lines of demarcation are stronger and broader, purposely so, than those of actual life; but it is questionable whether Browning himself could have thus labelled his people and separated them into distinct compartments. For if the complexity of human nature and character is fully recognized by any writer whether poet, novelist, or biographer, it has surely been so recognized by the author of *Paracelsus*, of *Sordello*, of *The Ring and the Book*. It has been so frequently remarked that it seems but reiterating a truism to repeat the assertion that he writes of the individual, not of the race, not of *man* but of *men*; of men with much indeed which is common to the race, but with peculiar attention also to those idiosyncrasies which establish individuality. Hence the choice of soliloquists for the dramatic poems is most frequently made amongst those the interpretation of whose actions has presented special difficulty to the world at large.

Thus to Browning was left the vindication of Paracelsus, and for the bombast, the quack, the drunkard, of contemporary biography has been substituted the pioneer and martyr of science, failing, but on account of the magnitude of his designs; recognizing even in defeat the divine nature of the mission entrusted to his charge. For an Andrea del Sarto—to a less profound student of character appearing as “an easy-going plebeian” satisfied with a social life among his compeers, as an artist “resting content in the sense of his superlative powers as an executant”—is offered the Andrea of the poem bearing his name; a sometime aspiring nature, now embittered by the struggle, wellnigh ended within the soul, between yearnings towards future greatness and the desire for present gain; a nature of insight sufficient to realize that the bonds of materialism are galling, of moral force inadequate to effect their rupture. The more subtle, the more outwardly misleading the character, the stronger the attraction it would appear to have borne for Browning. It is no matter for surprise that in *Prince Hohenstiel Schwangau* he should have devoted over 2,000 lines to a study of that mysterious, if disappointing, figure in European politics of the middle of the last century—“at once the sabre of revolution and the trumpet of order.” And if conflicting elements of character constituted the main attraction of the personality of Napoleon III, a similar cause of fascination, as we have already noticed, exists in the instance before us; viz., the possibility of reconciling the extreme opinions professed in matters of Church ritual and doctrine, with the erudition, the political ability, and width of intellectual outlook notably characteristic of Cardinal Wiseman.

I. For avoidance of misunderstanding as to the intention of the Apology it is well to read the Epilogue as Prologue, although, even with this introduction, it is not easy to decide

how far the speaker is serious in his assertions—a definite answer to the question would probably have presented (so Browning would suggest) some difficulty to the Bishop himself.

For Blougram, he believed, say, half he spoke.  
 The other portion, as he shaped it thus  
 For argumentatory purposes,  
 He felt his foe was foolish to dispute.  
 Some arbitrary accidental thoughts  
 That crossed his mind, amusing because new,  
 He chose to represent as fixtures there,  
 Invariable convictions (such they seemed  
 Beside his interlocutor's loose cards  
 Flung daily down, and not the same way twice)  
 While certain hell-deep instincts, man's weak tongue  
 Is never bold to utter in their truth  
 Because styled hell-deep ('tis an old mistake  
 To place hell at the bottom of the earth)  
 He ignored these—not having in readiness  
 Their nomenclature and philosophy :  
 He said true things, but called them by wrong names.  
 "On the whole," he thought, "I justify myself  
 "On every point where cavillers like this  
 "Oppugn my life: he tries one kind of fence,  
 "I close, he's worsted, that's enough for him.  
 "He's on the ground: if ground should break away  
 "I take my stand on, there's a firmer yet  
 "Beneath it, both of us may sink and reach.  
 "His ground was over mine and broke the first." (ll. 980-1004.)

II. Thus the Bishop believed himself to realize the weakness of his opponent; his superficiality in spite of his appeal to the ideal; the worldliness which would esteem this hour of intercourse with the prelate the highest honour of his life,

The thing, you'll crown yourself with, all your days.

An incident which he would not fail to turn to

Capital account ;

"When somebody, through years and years to come,

- "Hints of the bishop,—names me—that 's enough :  
 "Blougram? I knew him"—(into it you slide)  
 "Dined with him once, a Corpus Christi Day,  
 "All alone, we two: he 's a clever man :  
 "And after dinner,—why, the wine you know,—  
 "Oh, there was wine, and good!—what with the wine . . .  
 "'Faith, we began upon all sorts of talk!  
 "He 's no bad fellow, Blougram ; he had seen  
 "Something of mine he relished, some review :  
 "He 's quite above their humbug in his heart,  
 "Half-said as much, indeed—the thing 's his trade.  
 "I warrant, Blougram's sceptical at times :  
 "How otherwise? I liked him, I confess!" (ll. 31-44.)

Just or unjust, such is the Bishop's estimate of his companion—(if the opportunist is "quite above their humbug in his heart," not so the would-be idealist!) And, accepting this view, the futility of casting pearls before swine restrains him from a free expression of those deeper thoughts which rise to the surface only here and there throughout the monologue, evidence of the man beneath the prelate. There are problems which do not admit of discussion "to you, and over the wine." Hence Blougram holds himself justified in exercising that "reserve or economy of truth" recognized<sup>1</sup> by a contemporary writer of his own community as permissible under given conditions, within one class of which he may reasonably account as falling, his interview with Gigadibs; viz., that in which the listener is incapable of understanding truth stated exactly, when it may be presented in the nearest form likely to appeal to his comprehension. The journalist is thus from the first accepted by the Bishop as representative of his world—that portion of the lay world to which the position of this particular prelate of the Roman Catholic Church is one requiring justification. Scepticism is so easy to this special intellectual type of man, faith so difficult, that

<sup>1</sup> *Apologia pro vita sua*. J. H. Newman.

it is to him incomprehensible that the Bishop may be genuine in his profession. On these grounds Blougram bases the necessity for his defence.

III. Taking himself then at his critics' estimate, *i.e.*, as a sceptic masquerading in the garb of an ecclesiastical dignitary, he opens his exposition by a comparison of his life as actually lived with the ideal life advocated by the critic and his compeers. Pursuing the subject—having attained even to the supreme honour to which his calling admits, having ascended the papal throne, the position would yet be but one of *outward* splendour, incomparable with "the grand, simple life" a man *may* lead; grand, because essentially genuine—"imperial, plain and true." Nevertheless, he would submit, it is better for a man so to order his life that it may be lived to his satisfaction in Rome or Paris of the nineteenth century, rather than to dissipate his powers in the evolution of some ideal scheme, impossible of practical execution. As illustration, follows the incident of the outward-bound vessel in which are provided cabins of equal dimensions for the accommodation of all passengers. One would fain fill his "six feet square" with all the luxuries which the mode of life hitherto pursued has rendered essential to his comfort. His neighbour, meanwhile, has limited his requirements to the possibilities of the space allotted; with the result that the man content with little finds himself satisfactorily equipped for the voyage; whilst he of great, but impracticable aspirations, is left with a bare cabin, one after the other the articles of his proposed outfit having been rejected by the ship's steward. Hence the deduction, that the man of moderate requirements is better fitted for life, as life now is, than he of the "artist nature." Later on (l. 763) the speaker again reverts to the same simile, passing to the further illustration of the traveller providing his equipment in advance, in each case adapting it to a climate to be sub-

sequently reached, rather than to that in which he is at the moment living.

As when a traveller, bound from North to South,  
Scouts fur in Russia: what's its use in France?  
In France spurns flannel: where's its need in Spain?  
In Spain drops cloth, too cumbrous for Algiers! (ll. 790-793.)

The question not unreasonably follows, "When, through his journey, was the fool at ease?"

Thus, according to the Bishop, he who can most completely accommodate himself to the exigencies of the present life, evinces his capability for adapting himself to that which is to come. A theory, in direct opposition, it would appear, to Browning's usual doctrine, repeated in so many of the familiar poems. It is difficult to imagine a figure affording more striking contrast to the prosperous prelate than that of the Grammarian, once the "Lyric Apollo, electing to live nameless," occupied with the pursuit of an abstract good; only paving the way for the attainment of his successors; and in death throwing on God the task of making "the heavenly period perfect the earthen," that incomplete phase of existence, full of unsatisfied aspirations, of unfinished attempts. Of him the poet gives us the assurance that he shall find the God whom he has sought: whilst for the worldling who

Has the world here—should he need the next,  
Let the world mind him!

In *Cleon*, in *A Death in the Desert*, in *Dûs Aliter Visum*, and perhaps above all in *Abt Vogler* (to refer to only a few illustrations out of the many possible), the fact that man is incapable of accommodating himself to his environment is treated as a proof that this is not his true sphere of existence; that he was designed, and is still destined, for something higher. So asks the lover of Pauline:



How should this earth's life prove my only sphere?  
 Can I so narrow sense but that in life  
 Soul still exceeds it?

In *Dis Aliter Visum*, the assertion

What 's whole, can increase no more,  
 Is dwarfed and dies, since here 's its sphere ;

has especial reference to love,

The sole spark from God's life "at strife"  
 With death, so, sure of range above  
 The limits here.

but there is a recognition of the general principle that that work alone is worth beginning here and now, which "cannot grow complete," and which "heaven (not earth) must finish." Even where, as in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, Browning lays strongest emphasis upon "the unity of life"; where age is regarded as the completion of the physical life begun in youth, the question is put, and left unanswered:

Thy body at its best,  
 How far can it project thy soul on its lone way?

These years of mortal life are to be devoted to the best use, so that it shall not be possible to say that "soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul." Nevertheless, the final result is to be that man, in yielding his physical life, passes

A man, for aye removed  
 From the developed brute ; a god though in the germ.

It cannot be denied that the Bishop is taking a distinctly lower position than that suggested by any of the theories thus advanced. Nevertheless, he holds himself, and probably with reason, to be upon higher ground than that occupied by his critic. Recognizing his incapacity for experiencing the enthusiasm of a Luther, he does not, therefore, feel con-

strained to adopt the coldly critical attitude of a Strauss. In his own words—

My business is not to remake myself,  
But make the absolute best of what God made. (ll. 355-356.)

So Luigi, in calculating his fitness for the office of assassin assigned him, is found reckoning his very insignificance as of greater worth, under the given conditions, than his strength—extending his philosophy in a general application to human life.

Every one knows for what his excellence  
Will serve, but no one ever will consider  
For what his worst defect might serve: and yet  
Have you not seen me range our coppice yonder  
In search of a distorted ash? I find  
The wry, spoilt branch, a natural, perfect bow.<sup>1</sup>

There is a possible vocation in life for a Blougram as for a Luther.

IV. Admitting then the wide difference between the ideal life proposed by his critics, and the practical life which he has himself adopted, with line 144 the Bishop passes to a consideration of the possibility of effecting any form of reconciliation between the two theories. What restrained his college friend from seeking the position occupied by his comrade? What but his incapacity for belief, or, more accurately speaking, his incapacity for accepting any fixed and markedly defined creed. This difficulty the Bishop assumes himself to share: his faith is relative rather than absolute; hence, having adopted the position of unbelievers, so-called, the question remains, how may each in his several station, lead a life consistent with such profession? The prelate holds that to preserve a fixed attitude of unbelief is a feat of even greater difficulty than that of maintaining the opposed posi-

<sup>1</sup> *Pippa passes*, iii, 1210-1215.

tion of faith—neither being in fact absolutely and unalterably defined. It is easy enough for the onlooker to imagine that the creed of the Church is a matter straightforward and unperplexing for those living within the fold, admitting of no questioning, no error; faith or unfaith; no half measures possible. Not so; even within the Church the believer has his difficulties wherewith to contend, his doubts, his hesitations.

That way  
Over the mountain, which who stands upon  
Is apt to doubt if it be meant for road;  
While, if he views it from the waste itself,  
Up goes the line there, plain from base to brow,  
Not vague, mistakeable! what's a break or two  
Seen from the unbroken desert either side? (ll. 197-203.)

The Bishop would go yet further, and suggest that the inevitable doubts and questionings of the earnest believer are in themselves but a means of strengthening faith: this being so, what should restrain him from entering the Church's fold?

What if the breaks themselves should prove at last  
The most consummate of contrivances  
To train a man's eye, teach him what is faith?  
And so we stumble at truth's very test! (ll. 205-208.)

Since consistent unbelief is at least as impossible as consistent faith, the conclusion follows that life must be either one of "faith diversified by doubt," or of "doubt diversified by faith." Well, he has chosen one, let Gigadibs enjoy the other—if he can.

V. Which life is preferable, that which calls the chess-board white, the life of faith (in so far as faith is possible); or that which calls the chess-board black, the life of doubt? The predominating (though by no means absolute) influence of belief or of unbelief, determines the lines on which character and life alike shall develop. Now, the Bishop asserts that

for him belief will bring, nay, has indeed brought, what he most desires in life—"power, peace, pleasantness, and length of days." If Gigadibs suggests that in his case unbelief will bring the satisfaction which belief affords his companion of the dinner-table, then the Bishop demurs. The faith of which he makes profession is calculated to meet all exigencies—faith is in short his "waking life." The scepticism of the journalist is, on the contrary, void of all practical utility. Should he wish to live consistently he must cut himself off from those everyday demands of life to which faith is an absolute requisite. He must "live to sleep." And here the Bishop emphasizes an obvious, though not commonly recognized fact—a powerful argument in favour of faith—in the abstract, at least. He who professes himself a sceptic in matters spiritual, is yet compelled to the exercise of faith in each act of practical life. Mutual confidence abolished between man and man, business transactions become impossible, and mercantile activity is brought to a standstill. Belief involved in matters such as these, must, would the sceptic prove consistent, be cast overboard with the other faiths of his childhood: and the active man of the world becomes "bed-ridden." Amongst the temporal advantages which the Bishop accounts as resulting from his profession, first rank is accorded "the world's estimation, which is half the fight," to gain which nothing less than a positive confession of unswerving faith is required. Hence circumstances have forced from him the assertions:

Friends,  
I absolutely and peremptorily  
Believe! (ll. 243-245.)

I say, I see all,  
And swear to each detail the most minute

In what I think a Pan's face—you, mere cloud:  
 I swear I hear him speak and see him wink,  
 For fear, if once I drop the emphasis,  
 Mankind may doubt there's any cloud at all. (ll. 866-871.)

The world has decided that with regard to

Certain points, left wholly to himself,  
 When once a man has arbitrated on,  
 . . . he must succeed there or go hang. (ll. 289-291.)

And of the most important of these "points" is

The form of faith his conscience holds the best,  
 Whate'er the process of conviction was. (ll. 296-297.)

The Roman Catholic faith is that in which the Bishop was born and educated. It had been decided from childhood that he should become a priest: hence his choice of vocation. And this faith is, for him, one in which power temporal, as well as spiritual, puts forth its claims. Its undaunted champion may assert "I have loved justice and hated iniquity, therefore I die in exile," but in drawing the distinction between "Peter's creed" and that of Hildebrand, Blougram recognizes by implication the political aspect of the cause for which the struggle thus closing had been sustained.

VI. If then, in satisfaction of the demands of those uncompromising advocates of truth of whom Gigadibs is representative, the prelate of the nineteenth century shall renounce his position as confessor of the creed of the eleventh, in what rank of life may he take his stand? From what career may faith be, without injurious effects, wholly excluded? For if faith, to merit its title, is to be unmixed with doubt, equally must unbelief be unalloyed in quality. A life apart from faith? That of Napoleon? If so, then does the critic

claim that Napoleon shares with him the "common primal element of unbelief," belief being an impossibility. Yet to such an admission the Corsican's whole career would give the lie. Whatever the character of the faith which sustained him, faith there was, sufficient to lead him on to colossal deeds: his trust may have been "crazy," "God knows through what, or in what"; but to all intents and purposes it was faith, possessing the essential element of faith, *life*, and the inspiration of life:

It 's alive  
And shines and leads him, and that 's all we want.

But to the Bishop such a life would have been impossible, since he has not the clue to Napoleon's faith. "The noisy years" would not have offered him his ideal, even were this life all. And he does not himself believe that this life *is* all: although he will not assert that to him a future state of existence is matter of absolute certainty. If the career of "the world's victor" is not then possible without faith of some kind, what of that of the artist, of the poet? With a return to the earlier cynical recognition of his own limitations, the Bishop enquires of what use an attempt on his part to emulate Shakespeare when endowed by nature with neither dramatic nor poetic faculty? Nevertheless he finds that he has much in life which Shakespeare would have been glad to possess. The author of *Hamlet* and of *Othello* might in truth enjoy the good things of earth by the mere exercise of imagination; yet, strange anomaly, he built himself

The trimmest house in Stratford town;  
Saves money, spends it, owns the worth of *things*.

Even a Shakespeare, then, may be more or less of a materialist. Thus the successful churchman who has attained the object of his ambition, whose life is one of pleasantness

and peace, may with confidence, turning to the poet, ask him—

If this life 's all, who wins the game?

VII. If, however, the existence of another life *is* to be recognized; if belief is to be allowed to take the place of scepticism, then the face of the argument is at once changed, and the Bishop is as ready as is his critic to admit that enthusiasm is the grandest inspiration of human nature. But he is—or so he would have his listener believe—no more capable of the enthusiastic faith of Luther than of the strategic achievements of Napoleon or the dramatic creations of Shakespeare. Nevertheless, the negations of the sceptic's creed bear for him no attraction. In either case remains the risk that faith or absence of faith may prove error. The uncertainty on both sides being equal, it is *not* as well to be Strauss as Luther. Better even the mere desire for belief in the story of the Gospels, than a dispassionately critical attempt to reconcile discrepancies in that which has no personal interest for the enquirer: the one means spiritual vitality, the other stagnation.

VIII. With line 647, once more reverting to his earlier demonstration of the impossibility of a "pure faith," the Bishop would submit that the Divine Presence is veiled rather than revealed by Nature, until such time as man shall have become capable of being "confronted with the truth of him." But what of the mediaeval days, "that age of simple faith"? Were men the better for their simplicity of belief? By no means, replies the casuist of the nineteenth century, whose faith "means perpetual unbelief." The simple faith proved itself unequal to the task of inspiring a life of outward morality: men could and did

Lie, kill, rob, fornicate  
Full in belief's face

Rather the lifelong struggle with doubt, than this childish credulity empty of practical result. And in spite of his doubts, Blougram holds his faith "sufficient," since it just suffices to keep the doubts in check. Nevertheless he will not incur the risk of shaking unduly such faith as he possesses. He must not, therefore, begin to question even the most questionable of ecclesiastical miracles. Whilst he cannot trust himself to criticize things spiritual, he may yet prevent himself from taking the first step in that direction. And here Browning has been accused of implying that the Roman Catholic Church demands of its members acceptance of miracles, such as that held to affect the blood of S. Januarius, referred to as "the Naples' liquefaction." The Bishop is obviously intended to suggest no universal obligation; with him the matter is purely personal. He has not, as he has already admitted, sufficient confidence in the calibre of his faith to allow reason to step in and question the reliability of that which he would fain hold implicitly as truth. He fears to take the first step on the road of criticism which ends in the definition of God as "the moral order of the universe." Is not this, allowing for the assumed scepticism of the Bishop, consistent with what we find Cardinal Wiseman writing of his experiences in the early days of struggle with doubts and questionings which cost him so much? Thus he writes to a nephew twenty years after the worst of the conflict was over; "During the struggle the simple submission of faith is the only remedy. Thoughts against faith must be treated at the time like temptations against any other virtue—put away—though in cooler moments they may be safely analysed and unravelled."<sup>1</sup>

In conclusion, the prelate emphatically reasserts the *prac-*

<sup>1</sup> Quoted. *Life and Times of Cardinal Wiseman*. W. Ward.



*tical* superiority of his choice of a career over that of this particular sceptic, since it is in fact impossible for the journalist to live his life of negation. He obeys the dictates of reason only where these do not run counter too markedly to the prejudices of others: there he is forced to yield to some extent. Thus he "grazes" through life, with "not one lie," escaping the censure of his fellow men, but not gaining their esteem or admiration, essentials to the happiness of his companion. So the Bishop remains victorious on all counts, and emphasizes the superiority of his position by bestowing upon his guest practical proof in the "three words" of introduction to publishers in London, Dublin, or New York, securing

Such terms as never [he] aspired to get  
In all our own reviews and some not ours.

IX. A few supplementary observations upon those points at which the Apologist touches the firmer ground which he recognizes as existing beneath the surface on which he bases his defence. That he is not entirely satisfied with the conditions of his existence is obvious from the character of the apology, which suggests, from time to time, thoughts higher than those to which he gives direct utterance. Opportunist as he would present himself to be, lines 693-698, are unmistakably the expression of inmost experience—

When the fight begins within himself,  
A man's worth something. God stoops o'er his head,  
Satan looks up between his feet—both tug—  
He's left, himself, i' the middle: the soul wakes  
And grows. Prolong that battle through his life!  
Never leave growing till the life to come!

It is here almost as if Browning cannot restrain the expression of his own personal feeling, so markedly characteristic is this passage of his general teaching. That which holds

good of all struggle is applicable also to the contest between faith and doubt. That implicit faith of mediaeval times, which exerted too little influence on practical life, was in character less virile, a factor less potent for good than is the Bishop's own limited belief, constantly assailed by doubt. Good strengthened by the contest with evil, faith increased by the conflict with doubt. The creed of Browning, in brief:

I shew you doubt, to prove that faith exists.  
The more of doubt, the stronger faith, I say,  
If faith o'ercomes doubt. How I know it does?  
By life and man's free will, God gave for that! (ll. 602-605.)

Let doubt occasion still more faith. (l. 675.)

Words recalling Tennyson's reference to the spiritual struggles of a more finely tempered nature than that of Blougram:

He fought his doubts and gather'd strength,  
He would not make his judgment blind,  
He faced the spectres of the mind  
And laid them: thus he came at length

To find a stronger faith his own.<sup>1</sup>

And the Bishop may not unjustly claim

The sum of all is—yes, my doubt is great,  
My faith's still greater, then my faith's enough. (ll. 724-725.)

These higher utterances, intermingled as they are with the openly expressed tenets of the opportunist; whilst testifying most clearly to the genius of Browning in its penetrative comprehension of human nature, that admixture of noble aspiration and base compromise; find their counterpart in the memorable advice of Polonius to Laertes, constituted for the main part of prudential maxims regulating the social com-

<sup>1</sup> *In Memoriam*, xcvi.

portment of the successful worldling; then, almost suddenly, as it were, at the close, breaking through to deeper ground and striking upon that unalterable principle of life, of universal import, of inexhaustible illuminative power, since it treats only of that which is in its essence infinite—

To thine ownself be true;  
And it must follow, as the night the day,  
Thou canst not then be false to any man.

Though the life which the Bishop defends may not be the highest measured by the standard of his own ideal, yet, "truth is truth, and justifies itself in undreamed ways." And there *is* truth in the recognition that the faith to which he looks for inspiration and guidance is a faith barely capable of holding its own in face of the battalion of assailable doubts. It may yet be that "the day-spring's faith" shall finally crush "the midnight doubt." Some solution of the problems of life must be sought, and why should that alone be rejected which alone offers a satisfactory clue? There is perhaps no finer passage in Browning, certainly none more melodious, than that in which Blougram, after comparing the relative positions of faith and unbelief as influencing life, concludes with this query.

Just when we are safest, there's a sunset-touch,  
A fancy from a flower bell, some one's death,  
A chorus-ending from Euripides,—  
And that's enough for fifty hopes and fears  
As old and new at once as nature's self,  
To rap and knock and enter in our soul,  
Take hands and dance there, fantastic ring,  
Round the ancient idol, on his base again,—  
The grand Perhaps! We look on helplessly.  
There the old misgivings, crooked questions are—  
This good God,—what he could do, if he would,  
Would, if he could—then must have done long since:

If so, when, where and how? Some way must be,—  
 Once feel about, and soon or late you hit  
 Some sense, in which it might be, after all.  
 Why not, "The Way, the Truth, the Life?" (ll. 182-197.)

It must be left to the individual decision to acquit or condemn the Bishop. The decision may perhaps depend upon the acceptance or rejection of the alternative, "Whole faith or none?" And "whole faith" as defined by the Apology is that which accepts all things, from the existence of a God down to the latest ecclesiastical miracle. Such an attitude is possible only to the uncritical mind. The spheres of faith and reason are not identical. The childlike intelligence may receive without question or effort of faith all that is offered it of things spiritual. It sees no cause for question, hence doubt does not arise. The logical and critical faculties have not been developed. But in the mind of the thinker, the logician, the metaphysician, reason will assert itself; judgment will not be blindfolded. If the postulates of faith are capable of proof by reason, then is faith no longer necessary; its sphere is usurped by reason which has become all-sufficient. To the man, therefore, whose intellect questions, analyses, dissects truths as they present themselves to him, a proportionately stronger faith is a necessity: the doubts so arising being, "the most consummate of contrivances to teach men faith."

Having once satisfied the insistent yearning of a nature which declares, I . . .

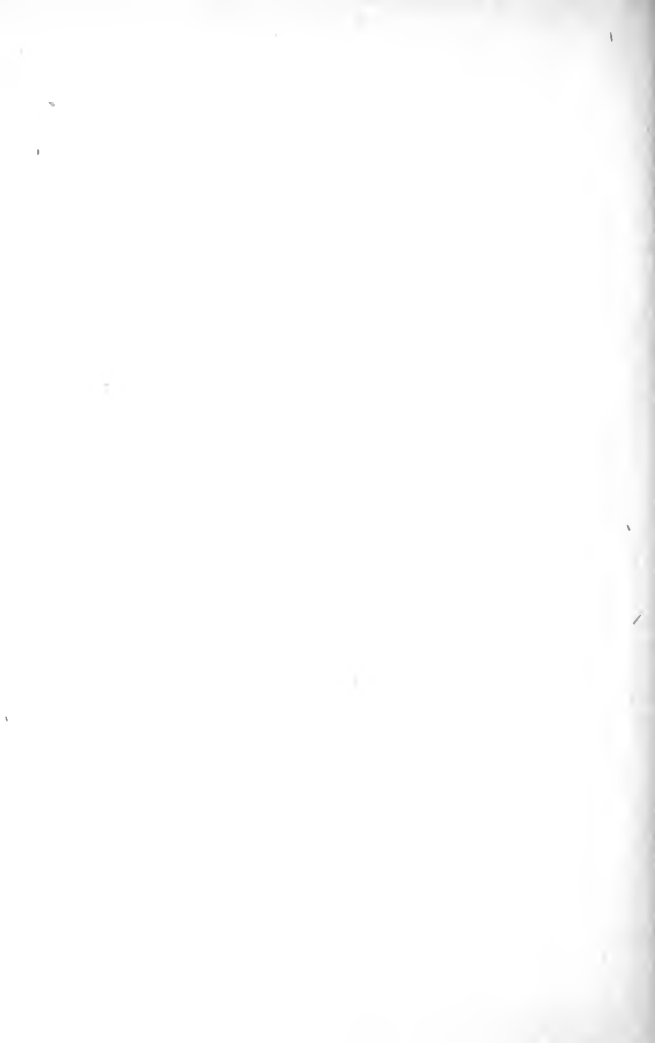
want, am made for, and must have a God  
 . . . No mere name  
 Want, but the true thing with what proves its truth,  
 To wit, a relation from that thing to me,  
 Touching from head to foot—which touch I feel. (ll. 846-850.)

(With this compare Mr. W. Ward on Cardinal Wiseman,

"his own early doubts . . . had been the alternative to a passionate, mystical, and absorbing faith.") This relation having been attained, the speaker is prepared

To take the rest, this life of ours.

Faith in the greatest having been assured, faith in that which is less may or may not follow. He who feels in touch with the Divine may well endure the existence of doubts and questionings inevitable in matters of less vital import. To the child "who knows his father near" tears are not an unalloyed bitterness; or, to adopt the Bishop's own simile, so be it the path leads to the mountain top, a break or two by the way matters little.



## LECTURE IV

CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (i)





## LECTURE IV

### CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (i)

NO poems of Browning's have probably excited more widely-spread interest (the question of admiration being set aside) than those which we have before us for consideration in this and the two following Lectures. The interest so excited is due, one believes, less to artistic merit than to the character of the subjects treated—unfailing in their attraction for the speculative tendencies of the human intellect. The form in which they now make appeal is no longer identical with that in which they presented themselves when *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* appeared in the middle of the last century: fifty years hence the embodiment of thoughts thus suggested may well differ yet more widely from that obtaining at the present day. Nevertheless, beneath all external variations, that which is essentially permanent remains: and in this enduring interest of subject inevitably subsists the immortality of that literary work, whether poetry or prose, in which it has found, or is destined to find, a vehicle of expression. If it were permissible to suggest a division where the author clearly intended no division should be, it might on the foregoing hypothesis be reasonable to prognosticate for *Easter Day* a more enduring interest than for the companion poem; since, whilst the

dramatic attraction is less powerful than in *Christmas Eve*, the treatment of subject goes deeper, and is more independent of temporary accessories. In a memorable phrase Professor Dowden has defined the subjects of the two poems as "the spiritual life individual, and the spiritual life corporate."<sup>1</sup> Both indeed deal with faith in its relation to life: the first with faith as found incorporated in typical religious communities of the civilized world; the second with faith as it makes direct appeal to the individual apart from the influence of external formulae. The one aspect of the subject is obviously regarded by Browning as complementary to the other. "Easter Day" is essential to the completion of "Christmas Eve." Both poems were originally published in one volume (1850), and still remain united by the joint title standing at the head of both. Individual faith is necessary to the vitality of faith corporate. The considerations engaging the attention of the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve* are confined to a decision as to which of the forms of creed presented for choice shall receive his adherence; or whether it may be justly yielded to that which he finally accounts no creed, the theory of life based upon the teaching of the Professor of Göttingen? In *Easter Day* the debate in the mind of the speaker goes deeper yet, and relates mainly to the difficulties attendant upon a practical and consistent acceptance of Christian belief in its simplest form: an acceptance involving a necessary reconstruction of life on the lines of faith. In another sense also are the two poems complementary. As indicated by the sequence of names in the title, the love and universal tolerance suggested by the Peace and Goodwill of Christmas find their fuller development, their essential, practical outcome in the personal faith,

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, Dent and Co., p. 124.

implying a personal acceptance of the sacrifice of which Easter Day marks the triumphant culmination. Hence the more notable *asceticism*, if we are so to term it, of the second poem as compared with the first. Rightly, he who would fain be a Christian stands in awe before

The all-stupendous tale,—that Birth,  
That Life, that Death! (*E.D.*, ll. 233-234.)

Thus in *Easter Day* is to be found no trace of that "easy tolerance" in matters spiritual which suggests itself—only, however, to be finally rejected—to the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve* as the result of his night's experiences. But a comparison of the two poems will be more satisfactorily made after a brief separate consideration of each in this and Lecture V. Lecture VI will be mainly occupied with a discussion of criticisms relating to both, as well as to the question of vital importance touching Browning's own position—How far must the conclusions of either or both be regarded as dramatic in character?

From a merely artistic point of view *Christmas Eve* presents its own peculiar interest. Having once read it, in whatever degree our minds may have become impressed by its theological or dogmatic arguments, externals have been so forcibly presented, that Zion Chapel and the common outside "at the edge of which the Chapel stands," always thereafter bear for us a curious kind of familiarity similar to that which attaches itself to remembered haunts of our childish days. The first three Sections of the Poem contain what may certainly be classed amongst the most grimly realistic descriptions in English literature. It may, indeed, be objected that these opening stanzas are *perilously* realistic in character where poetry is concerned, fitted rather for the pages of Dickens or of Gissing than for their present position.

The fat weary woman,  
Panting and bewildered, down-clapping  
Her umbrella with a mighty report,  
Grounded it by me, wry and flapping,  
A wreck of whalebones.

Then "the many-tattered little old-faced peaking sister-turned-mother," "the sickly babe with its spotted face," and the

Tall yellow man, like the Penitent Thief,  
With his jaw bound up in a handkerchief. (ll. 48-82.)

In short, read the second Section in its entirety. Such description is certainly not "poetic." But Browning knew well what he was doing. Influenced doubtless by his love of striking effects, we cannot but feel that he makes the unpleasing characteristics of the congregation assembled within the walls of Zion Chapel the more repellant, that the transition from the mundane to the divine may strike the reader with greater force. From the flock sniffing

Its dew of Hermon  
With such content in every snuffle.

the soliloquist of the poem calls us to follow him as he "flings out of the little chapel"; and with Section IV we have passed into the boundless waste of the common, where is

A lull in the rain, a lull  
In the wind too; the moon . . . risen  
[Which] would have shone out pure and full,  
But for the ramparted cloud-prison,  
Block on block built up in the West. (ll. 185-189.)

The scene thus outlined prepares us for the culmination of Section VI.

For lo, what think you? suddenly  
The rain and the wind ceased, and the sky  
Received at once the full fruition  
Of the moon's consummate apparition.

The black cloud-barricade was riven,  
 Ruined beneath her feet, and driven  
 Deep in the West ; while, bare and breathless,  
 North and South and East lay ready  
 For a glorious thing that, dauntless, deathless,  
 Sprang across them and stood steady.  
 'Twas a moon-rainbow, vast and perfect.

. . . . .  
 . . . . .  
 But above night too, like only the next,  
 The second of a wondrous sequence,  
 Reaching in rare and rarer frequency,  
 Till the heaven of heavens were circumflexed,  
 Another rainbow rose, a mightier,  
 Fainter, flushier and flightier,—  
 Rapture dying along its verge. (ll. 373-399.)

So the poet leads us to the climax—to the silence awaiting  
 the answer to the speaker's query

Oh, whose foot shall I see emerge? (l. 400.)

Then follow Sections VII and VIII, revealing the vision.

The too-much glory, as it seemed,  
 Passing from out me to the ground,  
 Then palely serpentining round  
 Into the dark with mazy error.

. . . . .  
 All at once I looked up with terror.  
 He was there.  
 He himself with his human air.  
 On the narrow pathway, just before.

But the writer keeps strictly within the bounds of reverence:

I saw the back of him, no more. (ll. 424-432.)

This treatment in itself may, I believe, be not unjustly taken  
 as indicative of Browning's devotional attitude towards the  
 subject. When, in Section IX, the face is turned upon the  
 narrator, he but records

So lay I, saturate with brightness. (l. 491.)

Where, in *Easter Day*, the description of the Divine Presence is given (xix, l. 640, *et seq.*), it is suggested with an awe and vagueness which certainly narrow the conception to no material presentation.

In addition to this vividness of contrast between the first three and the following Sections, the realistic force with which the poem opens has a yet further result. The uncompromising character of the realism opens the way for a more readily accorded credence in the subsequent events of the night. He who describes the vision has likewise seen the congregation in Zion Chapel. When he "flung out" of the meeting-house, his mood was certainly not indicative of imaginative idealism or mystic contemplation. He is in a frame of mind little likely to prove unduly susceptible to supernatural influences. A realization of this mental attitude is essential to a fair estimate of the line of argument throughout the poem.

I. Sections I, II, and III are thus occupied with the description of the Chapel and the congregation gathered within its walls, of the preacher and the spiritual food whereby he proposes to sustain the members of his flock. And notice: the speaker has entered perforce, driven within the sacred precincts by the violence of the elements. He is an outsider, and, as such, prepared to assume the attitude of critic rather than of sympathizer. And the severity of the criticism is intensified by physical and intellectual repulsion at the scene before him. Hence he recognizes all that is peculiarly objectionable in the special aspect of non-conformity presented within the Chapel. He perceives at once (1) "the trick of exclusiveness," and the consequent self-satisfaction induced; and (2) the "fine irreverence" of the preacher in presenting the "treasure hid in the Holy Bible" as "a patchwork of chapters and texts in severance, not improved by [his]

private dog's-ears and creases." He perceives "the trick of exclusiveness" which causes the congregation to hold itself to be

The men, and [that] wisdom shall die with [them],  
And none of the old Seven Churches vie with [them].

. . . . .  
And, taking God's word under wise protection,  
Correct its tendency to diffusiveness. (ll. 107-112.)

Later, when freed from the physical irritation attendant on proximity to this special collection of representatives of humanity, his prejudices are sufficiently modified to allow of the perception that some explanation of this exclusiveness is possible.

These people have really felt, no doubt,  
A something, the motion they style the Call of them;  
And this is their method of bringing about

. . . . .  
The mood itself, which strengthens by using. (ll. 238-245.)

The speaker is quite willing (when at a distance from the Chapel) to admit this right of attempting a reproduction of that mood in which the original conversion may have been effected. Nevertheless, he will *not* admit the right of the flock to shut the gate of the fold in the face of any outsider seeking entrance. Still

Mine's the same right with your poorest and sickliest  
Supposing I don the marriage vestiment. (ll. 119-120.)

In *Johannes Agricola in Meditation* this personal satisfaction of the Calvinist is presented in a still more extreme form.

Ere suns and moons could wax and wane,  
Ere stars were thundergirt, or piled  
The heavens, God thought on me his child;  
Ordained a life for me, arrayed  
Its circumstances every one  
To the minutest.

And this pre-ordained object of the Divine Love may assert with confidence—

I have God's warrant, could I blend  
 All hideous sins, as in a cup,  
 To drink the mingled venoms up;  
 Secure my nature will convert  
 The draught to blossoming gladness fast.

Thus happiness assured, inevitable, for the elect. For those excluded from the sacred number—

I gaze below on hell's fierce bed,  
 And those its waves of flame oppress,  
 Swarming in ghastly wretchedness;  
 Whose life on earth aspired to be  
 One altar-smoke, so pure!—to win  
 If not love like God's love for me,  
 At least to keep his anger in;  
 And all their striving turned to sin.

It is difficult to believe that the author of *this* poem, at any rate, would willingly have identified himself with the Calvinistic creed. To Caliban, a creature so largely devoid of moral sense, we have, indeed, seen him assigning a belief closely akin to that involved in the meditations of Johannes, when he refers to the difference of the fates irrevocably allotted by Setebos to himself and to Prospero; both theories in curious contrast with the reflections of the Book of *Wisdom*: "For thou lovest all the things that are, and abhorrest nothing which thou hast made: for never wouldest thou have made anything, if thou hadst hated it. . . . But thou sparest all, for they are thine, O Lord, thou lover of souls."<sup>1</sup>

Thus is explained "the trick of exclusiveness." What of the "fine irreverence" of the preacher? Here the success of

<sup>1</sup> *Wisdom of Solomon*, xi, 24-26.



the sermon as a means of spiritual conviction, is held to be dependent upon the attitude of mind of the listener.

'Tis the taught already that profits by teaching. (l. 255.)

The method employed is only "abundantly convincing" to "those convinced before." To the critic possessed of unprejudiced intellectual faculties, the arbitrary collection of texts and chapters brought into connection by the capricious choice of the preacher is deserving of condemnation as a misrepresentation of the truth, by "provings and parallels twisted and twined," which would draw from even the more obvious Old Testament narrative proof of some doctrinal mystery of his creed—that Pharaoh received a demonstration

By his Baker's dream of Baskets Three,  
Of the doctrine of the Trinity. (ll. 230-233.)

Those of us who are inclined to reproach Browning for the severity of the condemnation of Roman Catholic ritual ascribed to the soliloquist in Section XI will do well to read again Sections I to IV, which assuredly place the service of Zion Chapel in a far less attractive light than that thrown upon the ceremony in progress beneath the dome of St. Peter's.

II. Thus the listener passes from the confines of the Chapel to the limitless expanse of the common without: and the change in externals is indicative also of that within. Whilst discerning the errors of preacher and congregation, the critic has been blinded to the fact that he, too, is equally removed from the spirit of love designed to prove the inspiring principle of all forms of Christianity, however crude their mode of expression. The soothing influence of Nature to which he has ever been peculiarly susceptible, causes at once

A glad rebound  
 From the heart beneath, as if, God speeding me,  
 I entered his church-door, nature leading me. (ll. 274-276.)

So he stands, recalling the visions of youth, when he "looked to these very skies, probing their immensities," and "found God there, his visible power." The power was unquestionable, a mere response to the evidence of the senses; but reason, coming to the aid of sight, pointed to the existence also of Love, "the nobler dower." The deduction is logical, since the absence of Love at once imposes limitations to power otherwise apparently infinite. The craving for love existent within the human heart demands satisfaction, and if in this direction the Deity is *unable* to satisfy the needs of his creatures, man here surpasses his maker, the creature the creator. Irresponsible power, not comprehensive of love, is of the character of that exercised by Setebos according to the theory of Caliban. Here man is seen endowed with gifts of heart and brain, to exercise *through* his own will, but *for* the glory of his creator "as a mere machine could never do." Power (in this place synonymous with force combined with knowledge) may advance by degrees, not so Love. Love does not admit of measurement, since it is by nature infinite. As with eternity, so with Love. By no relative estimate of time can any possible realization of eternity be approached; the sole result of any such attempt at exposition being necessarily conducive to a wholly erroneous impression on the mind, since that which is in its essence infinite admits of no defined measure. Thus infinite Love remains infinite in spite of human limitations. Whilst absolute truth remains, though the revelation to man is gradual, so does Love remain unimpaired, though man may profit by or abuse it.

'Tis not a thing to bear increase  
 As power does: be love less or more

In the heart of man, he keeps it shut  
 Or opes it wide, as he pleases, but  
 Love's sum remains what it was before. (ll. 322-326.)

Thus S. Augustine: "Do heaven and earth then contain Thee, since Thou fillest them? . . . The vessels which are full of Thee do not confine Thee, though they should be shattered, Thou wouldest not be poured out."<sup>1</sup>

To sum up: Where Power alone was at first discernible, in the wonderful care manifested in the smallest creation, "in the leaf, in the stone," the work of Love eventually became equally clear. For a similar expression of Browning's more immediately personal faith we have only to turn to his latest published work, *The Reverie of Asolando*.

From the first Power was—I knew.  
 Life has made clear to me,  
 That, strive but for closer view,  
 Love were as plain to see.

In simple faith in this all-prevailing Providence, in a recognition of the immanence of the Divine Love, the critic of Zion Chapel believes himself to have found the highest form of worship. Before the night is ended he is, however, to learn differently.

The Vision of Sections VII to IX renders still more forcible the revelation already begun with the escape from the Chapel—that the Love which may be duly worshipped alone in spirit and in truth yet recognizes the feeblest manifestation of either in the worshipper: and that the nearest approach to union with the Divine Love is to be sought in a fuller and more immediate response to the human. And it is worthy of notice that the Vision does not reveal itself within the confines of Zion Chapel, the abode of religious exclusiveness and intolerance; only when the freer atmosphere of Nature has been reached.

<sup>1</sup> *Confessions*, bk. i, chap. iii.

III. Rome, St. Peter's. With the opening of the next division of the Poem (Sections X to XII), we find the man who has been anxious that the divine worship shall be celebrated in beauty, as well as in spirit and in truth, again an onlooker: waiting without the walls of St. Peter's, "that miraculous Dome of God,"—waiting without, yet with eye "free to pierce the crust of the outer wall," and perceive the crowd thronging the cathedral

In expectation  
Of the main-altar's consummation.

And here is to be found all that was wanting to the bare whitewashed interior of "Mount Zion" with its "lath and plaster entry," with "the forms burlesque, uncouth" of its worship. Here the vast building

Ablaze in front, all paint and gilding,  
With marble for brick, and stones of price  
For garniture of the edifice. (ll. 538-540.)

In place of the "snuffle" of the Methodist congregation and the "immense stupidity" of the utterances of the preacher is the silence which may be felt of that solemn moment preceding the elevation, when "the organ blatant holds his breath . . . As if God's hushing finger grazed him." (ll. 574-575.) Whatever the sympathies of spectator or author, no lines in the entire poem are more impressive for the reader than those which follow:

Earth breaks up, time drops away,  
In flows heaven, with its new day  
Of endless life, when He who trod,  
Very man and very God,  
This earth in weakness, shame and pain,  
Dying the death whose signs remain  
Up yonder on the accursed tree,—

Shall come again, no more to be  
 Of captivity the thrall,  
 But the one God, All in all,  
 King of kings, Lord of lords,  
 As His servant John received the words,  
 "I died, and live for evermore!" (ll. 581-593.)

The conviction is almost inevitable that here something beyond even the power of dramatic genius has to be reckoned with; that some spirit more nearly akin to intimate personal sympathy served as inspiration of this passage.

Carried away by the infection of the prevailing enthusiasm, the spectator questions as to the cause which has led him to remain without upon the threshold-stone of the cathedral, whilst He who has led him hither is within. And the answer which Reason returns is, that whilst the Divine Wisdom may be capable of discerning the faith and love existent beneath the outward imagery, yet with "mere man" the case is otherwise; hence for him to disregard the inward promptings of his nature is dangerous to his spiritual welfare. Thus the decision:

I, a mere man, fear to quit  
 The due God gave me as most fit  
 To guide my footsteps through life's maze,  
 Because himself discerns all ways  
 Open to reach him. (ll. 621-625.)

For him to whom the bare walls of Zion Chapel have proved repellant, the glories of St. Peter's may conceivably be fatally attractive in their appeal to the senses: such, reasonably or unreasonably, is at least the belief of the soliloquist. The argument of this eleventh Section is perhaps the most difficult to follow satisfactorily of all those leading to the ultimate choice of creed. Before attempting to estimate the worth of

the conclusions, it may be well to trace briefly the line of thought by which they appear to have been reached.

(1) The spectator, at first struck by the glory of outward display as a means of still imposing upon the world "Rome's gross yoke," is yet led, through proximity to the Divine Presence, whilst seeing the error, "above the scope of error" to realize the love. And further, to admit (2) that the love inspiring the worshippers of St. Peter's on this Christmas Eve of 1849 was also "the love of those first Christian days," a love which did not hesitate to sacrifice all which might interpose between itself and the Divine Love whence it emanated. When

The antique sovereign Intellect  
Which then sat ruling in the world,  
                                          was hurled  
From the throne he reigned upon. (ll. 650-653.)

Subsequently followed all the wealth of poetry and rhetoric, of sculpture and painting sometime the pride of the classical world. Love, and it *was* Love which was acting, drew her children aside from these intellectual and sensuous gratifications, and pointed to the Crucified. She thus, says the soliloquist, had demanded of her votaries vast sacrifices which might reasonably have been held essential in the early days of Christianity. We have already seen, indeed, how empty of ultimate satisfaction had been these same intellectual pleasures to Cleon: how obviously light would have been, to him, the sacrifice involved in an acceptance of any faith which should afford a definite and reasonable hope for a future state of existence: how small a price would have been the loss of life temporal in view of the gain of life eternal.

(3) But the critic, whilst admitting the sublimity of the sacrifice of the first century of the Christian era, deprecates the demand made for its repetition in the nineteenth. It is

time for Love's children not only to "creep, stand steady upon their feet," but to "walk already. Not to speak of trying to climb" (ll. 697-699). The limitations imposed upon the intellect and its free development should long since have been discarded. (4) Yet, though recognizing this to the full, the speaker will not condemn one of those, however mistaken, whose foreheads bear "*lover* written above the earnest eyes of them." These worshippers within St. Peter's need some satisfaction of the demands made upon their nature by an inherent craving for beauty; and yet have they sacrificed for Love's sake all that they might have found of intense enjoyment in unfettered life. Dwelling amidst the glories of Rome, ancient and modern, they yet turn from the "Majesties of art around them." Faith struggles to suppress intellectual and artistic cravings; and these, at length subdued, they "offer up to God for a present." Denied in the world without the sensuous satisfaction for which they yearn, they would seek it in the display attendant on the Roman Catholic ritual. This is the view of the man who believes himself to be the true "lover" of God, capable of worshipping in spirit and in truth.

How far is he justified in such criticism? Unquestionably he is prejudiced. There exists an unconscious mental bias towards that creed which he is represented as finally accepting; and there is little doubt that it is Browning's intention to expose the prejudice. The failure in appreciation of the ceremonial at St. Peter's arises from inability to apprehend beauty in the outward accessories of the service of which he is witness. To his nature it would appear that the demand upon the sensuous side is not so strong as he imagines when he expresses the fear of entering the cathedral and joining the worshipping crowd. He seems, moreover, to ignore, or to pass over lightly, the productions of Christian

art, whether in painting or in the music of religious ritual, when he inquires (ll. 681, *et seq.*):

Love, surely, from that music's lingering,  
Might have filched her organ-fingering,  
Nor chosen rather to set prayings  
To hog-grunts, praises to horse-neighings.

He ignores, too, the value of symbolism in the later mocking allusion to this experience as "buffoonery—posturings and petticoatings."

In the main line of thought, however, beginning with Section XI, and developed more fully in XII, is treated no imaginary danger, but that bound inevitably to attend on any religious system in which authority is paramount. The error attributed to the advocates of the Roman Catholic creed is that of rendering the head too completely subservient to the heart. Faith cannot indeed be acquired by any considerations of logic; nevertheless, there is no necessity that Reason and Faith should prove antagonistic forces. To the brain, as well as to the heart, must be allowed scope for development. Hence the speaker represents that Church, in which freedom of thought is limited, as interposing as an intermediary between the conscience and the Divine influence. Such Church he regards as having devoted its energies to the development of a single element or faculty of human nature to the exclusion or limitation of the rest. Nevertheless, in one direction there has been development to an extraordinary degree: and Browning himself, as we have good reason to know, would have been unlikely to criticize adversely this whole-hearted devotion to a cause. For illustration the soliloquist employs that of the sculptor who, without calculating the dimensions of his marble, devotes his energies to the production of a perfect head and shoulders only. This, though necessarily unfinished in actual



performance, is far grander in conception than a smaller and fully modelled figure; and the spectator is free to seek elsewhere the completion of the unfinished statue in the work of an artist complementary to that of the first. Thus the onlooker at St. Peter's resolves to accept the provision there offered for the "satisfaction of his love," then depart elsewhere—depart to seek the completion of the statue—"that [his] intellect may find its share." And it is noteworthy that the same critic, who condescends to the employment of language such as that marking the references to the service of St. Peter's, ascribes to the Church of Rome the development of that element which he esteems highest in human nature. Love is ever with the author of *Christmas Eve*, as with the soliloquist, of worth immeasurably greater than mere intellect.

IV. With Section XIII the critic of Zion Chapel passes once more into the night in search of satisfaction for those demands of the intellect which have been left unanswered at St. Peter's; and in Section XIV he is represented as finding that which he seeks. Love and Faith to the exclusion of intellectual development he has left in the cathedral at Rome; Intellect without Love he meets in the Lecture Hall at Göttingen. Believing himself to have learned the lesson that wherever even nominal followers of Christ are to be found, there, too, is the Divine Presence, he is now "cautious" how he "suffers to slip"

The chance of joining in fellowship

With any that call themselves his friends. (ll. 800-803.)

Hence, entering the Hall, he follows the course of the consumptive Lecturer's reasoning on "the myth of Christ." As to this fable which "Millions believe to the letter" he (the Lecturer) proposes to attempt the work of discrimination between truth and legend.

(1) He reminds his audience, and justly, that it is well at times to pause to inquire concerning the source of articles of their belief; historic fact may become disguised or concealed by accretions of legendary narrative gathered round it: by the various expositions assigned it by commentators of different ages. (2) Having thus examined and freed his "myth" from the misinterpretations of the early disciples, from later additions and modifications; when all has been done he yet admits that the residuum is well worthy of preservation.

A Man!—a right true man, however,  
Whose work was worthy a man's endeavour. (ll. 876-877.)

Moreover

Was *he* not surely the first to insist on  
The natural sovereignty of our race? (ll. 888-889.)

As it were in startling comment upon the assertion of this natural sovereignty, the Professor's further speech is interrupted by a fit of coughing, and the listener avails himself of the opportunity thus offered to leave the Hall.

Once more free to breathe the outer air his critical powers reassert themselves, and he sees from a point of observation, sufficiently removed, the relative effects of the excesses of the most widely differing forms of Christianity and of that form of belief or of scepticism which denies the divinity of the founder of the creed. His decision is given in favour of superstition as opposed to scepticism.

Truth's atmosphere may grow mephitic  
When Papist struggles with Dissenter,  
.  
.  
.  
Each, that thus sets the pure air seething,  
May poison it for healthy breathing—  
But the Critic leaves no air to poison. (ll. 898-909.)

Then follows the criticism of the Critic.

What has the lecturer, indeed, left to the followers of the Christ?

(1) Intellect? Is the possession of pure intellect to be accounted cause for worship? Even so, others have taught morality as Christ taught it, with the difference (and this surely an advantage from the critic's standpoint) that these teachers have failed to assert of themselves that to which Christ laid claim on his own behalf: that,

He, the sage and humble,  
Was also one with the Creator. (ll. 922-923.)

(2) Worship of the intellect being thus disallowed, what then of the moral worth of the Man Christ as admitted by the Lecturer? Is mere virtue, however great in degree, sufficient to claim as of right for its possessor the submission of his fellow men? Perfection of moral character being allowed, is this adequate reason that the Christ should be held supreme ruler of the race? To answer the question satisfactorily one of two theories must be accepted: either "goodness" is of human "invention" or it is a divine gift freely bestowed. If the first, the Professor's listener holds that "worship were that man's fit requital" who should have proved himself capable of exhibiting in his own life, *for the first time in the world's history*, that which "goodness" really is. Recognizing, however, the incontrovertible fact that moral worth was present in the world prior to the foundation of Christianity, the so-called "invention" of goodness resolves itself into a mere matter of definition, and the adjustment of names to qualities already existent. In this case he who has achieved this work is no more deserving of worship as the originator or creator of goodness than is Harvey to be adjudged inventor of the circulation of the blood. One is inclined here to question whether the speaker is not carrying his argument

beyond the point necessary to the exposure of the weakness of the Lecturer's position as professed follower of a merely human Christ. Whether or not this be so, he has succeeded in proving logically untenable the first of the two hypotheses suggested in this connection. What then of the second? If goodness is admittedly the direct gift of God, if the founder of Christianity taught how best to preserve such gift "free from fleshly taint"; then he merits indeed the title of Saint, but no more transcendent honour, his powers differing in degree, not in kind, from those of his fellow men: he was inspired, but as Shakespeare was inspired. No immensity of virtue may effect the conversion of human nature into the divine; and the man of supreme moral dignity, as of marvellous intellectual capacity, remains man only; vastly, but yet measurably, beyond his fellows; the position attained being one to which it is possible that humanity may again attain, nay, which it may even surpass in the future "by growth of soul." And this divine gift of goodness may, moreover, necessarily be bestowed in accordance with the divine will; hence, he who made this man Pilate may well make "this other" Christ. Thus then, if the Prophet of Nazareth is to be regarded as mere man, the Professor's argument breaks down following the adoption of either hypothesis—that involving a divine or a human origin of goodness.

Is there any point at which the faith of the Christian may come into contact with that of him who, whilst calling himself a follower of Christ, by a denial of His divinity refuses credence to a direct assertion on the part of his leader? To the Christian the main proof of divine inspiration is the spark of divine light kindled within the human breast, that which supplies motive for action, which instigates to practical application of the good already recognized as good by the intelligence: not identical with conscience (as is clear from

line 1033), but the power which awakens the activities of conscience. Here again a suggestion of Browning's usual estimate of the relative worth of the intellect and the heart. The man whose moral standard of life is most depraved is yet possessed of the capacity for discriminating between good and evil; since such capacity does not necessarily imply the co-existence of a life-giving faith, and through faith alone may knowledge become of practical utility.

Whom do you count the worst man upon earth?

Be sure, he knows, in his conscience, more

Of what right is, than arrives at birth

In the best man's acts that we bow before. (ll. 1032-1035.)

To *know* is not to *do*: a distinction akin to that drawn in the Epistle of James<sup>1</sup> between intellectual credence and living faith—between belief, the result of the acceptance of certain facts making inevitable appeal to the intellect, and faith inspiring life, the ultimate results of which are manifest in action. This distinction we find again strikingly presented in parabolic form in *Shah Abbas of Ferishtah's Fancies*.

The most marked lines of divergence between listener and lecturer would appear then to be that mere abstract good, even morality personified, is insufficient for the satisfaction of the demands of human nature: that the life lived in Palestine did not denote a mere renewal of things old, a more extended development of the good already existent in the world. It introduced a new and more active principle of life, that to which all past history had been leading up, that from which the future history of the human race must take its starting point. *The revelation of God in man had been made to men.* To sum up—

Morality to the uttermost,

Supreme in Christ as we all confess,

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter ii, 14-20.

Why need we prove would avail no jot  
 To make him God, if God he were not?  
 What is the point where himself lays stress?  
 Does the precept run, "Believe in good,  
 "In justice, truth, now understood  
 "For the first time?"—or, "Believe in me,  
 "Who lived and died, yet essentially  
 "Am Lord of Life?" Whoever can take  
 The same to his heart and for mere love's sake  
 Conceive of the love,—that man obtains  
 A new truth; no conviction gains  
 Of an old one only, made intense  
 By a fresh appeal to his faded sense. (ll. 1045-1059.)

These the lines of divergence. Are there none of approach? asks the listener who is gradually learning from his night's experience to seek a common bond of sympathy between himself and his fellow men, rather than an increase of the repulsion so spontaneously awakened within the walls of Zion Chapel. At Rome he took his share in the "feast of love," which afforded little satisfaction to intellectual cravings; here he would fain accept all that may accrue to him from the pursuit of learning apart from love.

Unlearned love was safe from spurning—  
 Can't we respect your loveless learning? (ll. 1084-1085.)

Recognizing the zeal for truth which has instigated the critical investigations of the lecturer, he is prepared, with a liberality of which he is clearly sufficiently conscious, to allow to him and to his followers such benefit as may be derived from the acceptance of "a loveless creed"; even conceding to them, so be it they still desire it, the name of Christian, which he too bears. With generosity yet greater he will refrain from all attempt to disturb that condition of stoical calm to which they have at length attained, by pointing out to them the weaknesses of their theory, which he has just so amply demonstrated to his own satisfaction.

V. Thus he leaves the lecture hall in a "genial mood of tolerance," of which the conclusions of Section XIX are the outcome. The element of truth existent in varying forms of creed, beneath all dissimilarities of outward expression, has at length become recognizable; carrying with it the prevision of that complete union ultimately to be effected before "the general Father's throne." When "the saints of many a warring creed" shall have learned

That *all* paths to the Father lead  
Where Self the feet have spurned.

Where

Moravian hymn and Roman chant  
In one devotion blend;

and all

Discords find harmonious close,  
In God's atoning ear.<sup>1</sup>

Of what nobler conception, it may be asked, is the human imagination capable? Nevertheless, to certain natures (so holds the soliloquist, clearly recognizing his own as of this calibre) there is danger lest this generous comprehensiveness should prove inseparable from the "mild indifferentism" fatal to action. Hence in Section XX, whilst engaged in watching his

Foolish heart expand  
In the lazy glow of benevolence, (ll. 1154-1155.)

he is not surprised to perceive, in the token of the receding vesture, indications of the divine disapproval of his position. And he is led to the conclusion that not only for the individual worshipper must there be some special form of creed best adapted to the individual needs of temperament, but (as ll. 1158-1159 would appear to suggest) some *absolute*

<sup>1</sup> *Godminster Chimes*. J. R. Lowell.

form of creed may possibly be discoverable. And to this "single track":

God, by God's own ways occult,  
May—doth, I will believe—bring back  
All wanderers. (ll. 1170-1172.)

Thus unity is attained, but with a suggestion of methods of attainment other than those indicated at the close of Section XIX. The main difference of intention between the two Sections would appear to be that whilst here (XX) also ultimate unity is to be achieved through the divine providence, yet something more is required of the individual believer than a passive reliance on the assurance of this future fusion of creeds. And further, the manifest and immediate duty being the discovery of the, for him, "best way of worship," this once reached, he must rest satisfied with no merely personal acceptance: the benefits resultant from his own spiritual experiences are designed for a wider use, a more extended service of human fellowship; he, too, may seek to "bring back wanderers to the single track." Here again is perceptible one of Browning's prevailing ideas. Never (I believe) is he to be found advocating any vast corporate revolution for the amelioration of mankind: the advance of the race is to be secured through the advance of individual members.

VI. As a practical result of the foregoing conclusions follow (in Section XXII) a return to the Chapel, and an application to the special form of worship therein celebrated, of the genial "glow of benevolence" already kindling within the breast of the sometime critic. And here the dramatic character of the poem becomes perhaps more strikingly obvious than hitherto. By one or two able and characteristic strokes is suggested the egotistical temperament of the soliloquist, with its susceptibility to external influences, its



inevitable tendency towards criticism. Even though he has, as he deems, learnt from the night's experience the valuable lesson of receiving "in meekness" the mode of worship simplest in form and most spiritual in character, yet the language employed in lines 1310-1315 is that of no advocate of a kindly tolerance, but of an orthodox and bigoted methodist. It is a part, so it would seem, of the dramatic purpose, and of the mental analysis of which Browning was so fond, to thus demonstrate to his readers how a reasoning and reflective being, possessed of a certain amount of intellectual alertness, should enrol himself amongst the members of a body whose pre-eminent characteristic to the unsympathizing spectator appears that of a narrow dogmatic exclusivism, combined with extreme intellectual limitations.

Nevertheless, in spite of practical result, very ably does the speaker in Section XXII theoretically define the essence of true worship, the spirit of devotion. Whilst human nature remains untranslated, and man is possessed of physical perceptions, and of ratiocinative faculties, the nasal intonation, and logical and grammatical lapses of the preacher, though they may be condoned, can hardly be ignored. But to the seeker after truth, so ardent should be the yearning towards the attainment of the end, that all defects in the means should be cheerfully accepted. It is perhaps not easy to put the case strongly enough, without going too far on the other side, and ignoring the means absolutely, thus returning to the position, already renounced by the soliloquist in Section V, where man looks direct "through Nature to Nature's God." A condition which, whilst unquestionably the highest and most purely spiritual, would appear to be possible to a certain type of mind only, and that in moments of special illumination. To the average temperament might arise from such a system the danger lest, whilst dispensing with forms,

the spirit should likewise be forgotten ; and worship should thus altogether cease. In accordance with the capacity for growth inherent in man's nature, with his creed, as with all else, must be development, if life is to be preserved. The means appointed for his instruction may not be always those in most complete adjustment with his inclinations ; nevertheless let him not neglect those vouchsafed him so long as all tend, however indirectly, towards the attainment of the ultimate goal, the complete realization of Truth. Seeking to gain for himself further knowledge of the Divine Will, let him not lose sight of the end in a too critical consideration of the means. What avails the thirsty traveller the splendour of the marble drinking-cup, if so be that it is empty :

Better have knelt at the poorest stream  
That trickles in pain from the straitest rift ! (ll. 1284-1285.)

To the question of main import advanced in the present instance,

Is there water or not to drink ? (l. 1288.)

the latest comer to Zion Chapel replies in the affirmative ; though he would fain wish

The flaws were fewer  
In the earthen vessel, holding treasure  
Which lies as safe in a golden ewer. (ll. 1300-1302.)

We are inclined to ask, might he not, too, have returned an affirmative answer in yet another relation, had he but regarded the celebrants of St. Peter's in that spirit of tolerance with which he now condones the defects of the Methodist preacher : since, on his own showing, there prevails in Zion Chapel the jealous exclusivism resultant from spiritual pride. Was not some valuable residuum of truth to be found in Rome ? Surely so. But had the soliloquist proved capable of giving this answer, with the change of personal

character thus indicated, would have been transformed, also, the character of the entire poem.

The reason for his present choice he makes sufficiently clear. That form of creed shall be his which takes into account the complexity of human nature. The emotions (so he holds) alone received satisfaction at Rome; intellectual development being checked. At Göttingen the intellect was cultivated at the expense of the spiritual faculties. Now in the poverty and ignorance of Zion Chapel he believes himself to discern provision, however poor in quality, for all man's requirements and aspirations. Immeasurably inferior to Rome in beauty of architectural form, in the impressiveness of its ritual; incomparably below Göttingen in intellectual attainment, it is yet in some sort superior to both alike. Superior to Rome in that it allows scope for the development of the intellectual capacity, coarse and poor as is the quality of the mental pabulum offered by its minister. Superior to Göttingen in that the preacher would fain afford some satisfaction to the emotional as well as to the intellectual cravings of his congregation. To these poor "ruins of humanity," a personal Saviour is a necessity:

Something more substantial  
Than a fable, myth, or personification.

*Some one, not something*, who in the critical hour of life shall do for him

What no mere man shall,  
And stand confessed as the God of salvation. (ll. 1322-1325.)

Clearly to the speaker, in spite of the objectionable character of the surroundings, they secure a "comfort"—

Which an empire gained, were a loss without. (ll. 1308-1309.)

Thus the choice is made in face of defects seemingly at first hopelessly repellent. And in leaving the soliloquist of

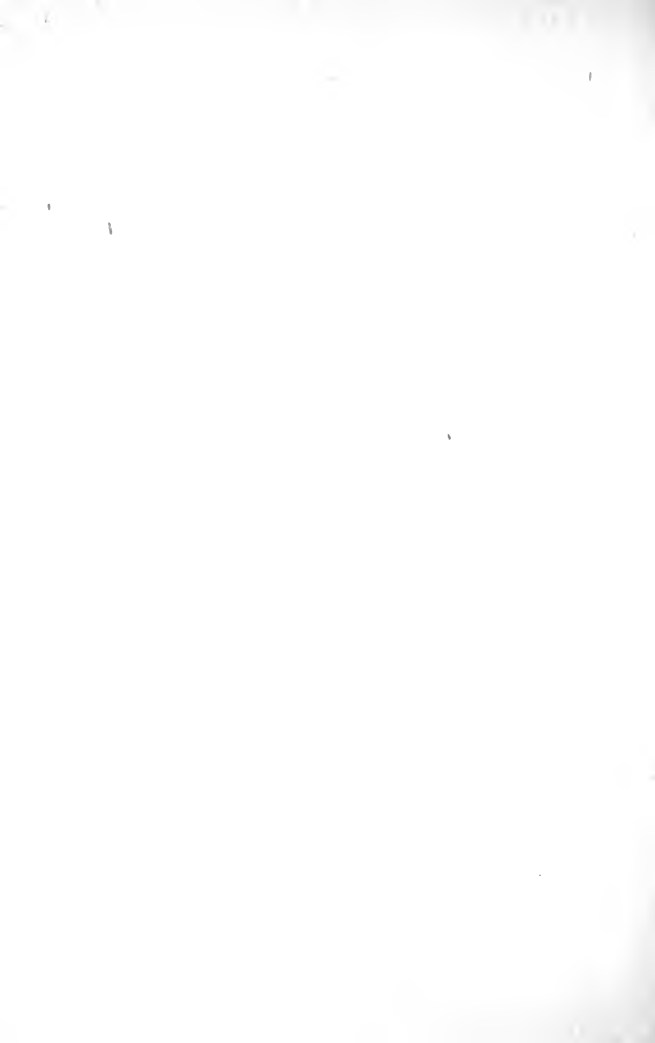
*Christmas Eve* amidst the Zion Chapel congregation, our conviction touching the future is based upon grounds amply justifiable; that he may in spiritual development outgrow the limits he has for the present assigned himself. Since, despite the influences of prejudice and of bigotry yet remaining, he has already proved capable of seeking a position whence, in his own words, direct reference is made to Him "Who head and heart alike discerns." From such a position, progress, expansion, as the law of life becomes, not only possible, but inevitable, since the soul's outlook is at once freed from limitations by the transference of contemplation

From the gift . . . to the giver,  
And from the cistern to the river,  
And from the finite to infinity,  
And from man's dust to God's divinity. (ll. 1012-1015.)

Such deductions as to the intention of *this* poem are at least fully in accordance with those suggestions of theories which we have so far gathered from a consideration of other of Browning's works.

## LECTURE V

CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (ii)



## LECTURE V

### CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (ii)

How very hard it is to be  
A Christian !

THUS in the opening lines of *Easter Day* is suggested the subject occupying the entire poem : a consideration of the difficulty attendant upon an acceptance of the Christian faith, sufficiently practical in character to serve as the mainspring of life. The difficulty is not solved at the close, since identical in form with the earlier assertion is the final decision

I find it hard  
To be a Christian. (ll. 1030-1031.)

Nevertheless, the nature of the position has been modified. The obstacles in the way of faith are no longer regretted as a bar to progress, rather are they welcomed as an impetus towards the increase of spiritual vitality and growth. It is the work of the intervening reflections and resultant deductions to effect this change, by supplying a reasonable hypothesis on which to base an explanation of the existent conditions of life.

As with *Christmas Eve*, so here, for a full appreciation of the arguments advanced, some understanding is essential of the character of the speaker. It is at once obvious that he

who finds it hard to be a Christian may not be identified with the critic of the Göttingen lecturer: but, that no loophole may be left for question, the statement is directly made in Section XIV.

On such a night three years ago,  
It chanced that I had cause to cross  
The common, where the chapel was,  
Our friend spoke of, the other day. (ll. 372-375.)

Later, in the same Section (ll. 398-418), a descriptive touch is supplied, recalling curiously Browning's estimate of himself in *Prospice*.

I was ever a fighter, so—one fight more,  
The best and the last !  
I would hate that death bandaged my eyes, and forbore,  
And bade me creep past.

Thus the first speaker in *Easter Day* refers to his childish aversion to uncertainty, even though uncertainty meant present safety.

I would always burst  
The door ope, know my fate at first. (ll. 417-418.)

This then is the man, a fearless fighter, an uncompromising investigator who, whilst he would "fain be a Christian," is yet bound to reject a mere uncritical acceptance of the tenets of Christianity. Opposed to him in the first twelve Sections is a second speaker to whom, somewhat strangely it would seem, the designation sceptic has been applied. The title in its virtual sense, is, indeed, justly applicable, but in the ordinary acceptation might possibly prove misleading. It is a fact of common experience that among professing Christians, of whatever form of creed, are to be found those who, in that peculiar crisis of life when death removes from sight those dearest to them, go back from the fundamental tenets of a



faith in which hitherto their confidence appeared to have been unshaken. Even that main pillar of faith, a belief in the immortality of the soul, lies temporarily shattered. Such failure suggests itself as the result of an insufficiently considered acceptance of dogma; an acceptance without question, rather than in spite of doubts and questionings. This distinction we have seen Bishop Blougram drawing between the position of the man who implicitly believes, since, his logical and reasoning faculties being undeveloped or inactive, no cause for question arises; and the position of him who, in the midst of spiritual perplexity, makes "doubt occasion still more faith." To Browning, with whom half-heartedness was the one unpardonable sin, this so-called faith would necessarily be far more dangerous than downright acknowledged scepticism. Hence the succeeding argument of *Easter Day* becomes one, not between a pronounced sceptic and a would-be Christian, but rather between two nominal Christians whose outward profession may be similar but the motives inspiring it wholly at variance—This in accordance with Browning's peculiar attraction towards problems involving the establishment of connection between motive and action. As in *Bishop Blougram's Apology* his psychological analysis would reconcile two apparently irreconcilable aspects of the mind of a prelate whose position had perplexed the world. As by a method closely akin to this treatment, he offers explanation of the presence, amongst the illiterate and bigoted congregation of Zion Chapel, of a man whose intellectual capacity should have led him to assume a position of wider tolerance: so here, too, he would discover and reveal the link between the outward form of creed and the widely differing spiritual acceptance of the same in two individual cases.

I. The arguments of Sections I to XII are not always

easy to follow closely ; but, in passing with Section XIII to the history of the Vision, all obscurity vanishes, and we have no difficulty in tracing the line of thought of the first speaker, resulting in his willing reconciliation to the uncertainties inseparable from human life as at present constituted. A brief attempt to follow the preceding course of argument will afford an explanation of the speaker's position at the opening of Section XIII. (1) The difficulty advanced at the outset of attaining to even a moderate realization of the possibilities of the Christian life is ascribed by the first speaker (at the close of Section I) to the essential indefiniteness in things spiritual implied in the very suggestion of advance, of growth. That which we believed yesterday to be the mountain-top proves to-day but the vantage-ground for a yet higher ascent :

And where we looked for crowns to fall,  
We find the tug's to come. (ll. 27-28.)

In reply, the second speaker admits the existence of difficulty, but of one differing somewhat in character from that recognized by his interlocutor. The Christian life were a sufficiently straightforward matter, if belief pure and simple were possible : if, as he puts the case, the relative worth of things temporal and eternal were once rendered clear and unmistakable. Even martyrdom itself would then become as nothing to the believer.

(2) The first speaker, or the soliloquist (since he it is who actually advances the arguments consistent with the position of his imaginary companion), whilst accepting the truth of the proposition, reasserts the theory, little more than suggested in Section I, that such fixity and definiteness of belief is, under existing conditions, an impossibility. If not in the visible world, granting so much, yet beyond it, is that which may not be grasped by the finite intelligence. Such limita-

tions may perchance serve for the term of mortal life; but in the light thrown upon life by the approach of death a change will inevitably pass over the aspect of all things, and

Eyes, late wide, begin to wink  
Nor see the path so well. (ll. 57-58.)

Again, the Christian who does not wish his position of moderate faith to be disturbed, agrees; but attributes the shifting ground of belief to the self-evident truth that faith would no longer be faith were the objects with which it deals mere matters of common and proved knowledge, belief in them as inevitable as the necessity of breath to the living creature.

You must mix some uncertainty  
With faith, if you would have faith be. (ll. 71-72.)

Even in the intercourse of everyday life, faith is a necessity. Now, had the easy-going Christian paused at this stage of the discussion, with line 82, his argument would have had the weight which attaches to an elaboration of the same theory given by Browning elsewhere—in *An Epistle of Karshish*. But even he, upon whom these considerations are forced for what one may well believe to be the first time, finds that any individual proposition requires constant modification, that a doubt will “peep unexpectedly.” Thus, though faith, with its attendant uncertainty, may well obtain in the relations between man and man, yet, between the Creator and his creation, is it not possible that more clearly defined regulations shall subsist?

(3) The thinker who is anxious to rightly adjust his own position in the world of faith interposes before the argument has passed to its final stage, and points to the conditions prevailing in the world of lower animal life where the entire creation “travails and groans”—reverting again to the assur-

ance which, as the conclusion of the poem is to show, had been indelibly stamped upon his mind by the experience of the Vision—the assurance already referred to in Sections I and II, that could these conditions be changed, then, too, would be altered the character of human life, its purpose—as Browning ever regards it—would be annulled. This is not the place to discuss the question of the probationary character of life and its educative purpose; it is sufficient to recognize that in Nature is discoverable no definite and final answer to the questionings of doubt. Hence, with Section VI, the second speaker shifts his ground; and admitting that this suggested “scientific faith,” is impracticable, declares himself none the more prepared, therefore, to yield such faith as may yet be possible to him. All he would ask is that the greater probability may rest upon the side of that creed which he professes. His belief, such as it is, affords him satisfaction, and will continue, so he holds, sufficient for his needs until its “curtain is furled away by death.” And he would at once meet the arguments which he sees his companion prepared to advance in favour of asceticism. To give up the world for Eternity is surely an act sufficiently easy of accomplishment, since the renunciation is daily effected for causes of small moment. Whilst the would-be Christian shrinks at prospect of the hardships involved in self-denial, his worldly neighbour is adopting that self-same life of abstention that he may attain an object no more important than that of acquiring a record collection of beetles or of snuff-boxes. In short, in the speaker’s own words, by subduing the demands of the flesh, he would be

Doing that alone,  
To gain a palm-branch and a throne,  
Which fifty people undertake  
To do, and gladly, for the sake

Of giving a Semitic guess,  
Of playing pawns at blindfold chess. (ll. 165-170.)

(4) The second speaker then, having declared himself satisfied with a minimum of evidence as to the truth of his creed, a balance, merely, in favour of its probability, there follows the scornful comment of the man who would take nothing upon trust, investigation of which is possible—

As is your sort of mind,  
So is your sort of search : you'll find  
What you desire, and that 's to be  
A Christian. (ll. 173-176.)

To such a nature belief is easy where belief is desirable; the very reason which would hinder faith on the part of his opponent. The search made either for intellectual or emotional satisfaction will meet with equal result. Whether for historical confirmation of the Scriptural narrative, or in a philosophic attempt to adapt the Christian creed to the wants of the human heart. Where, indeed, this satisfaction is found for spiritual cravings, the intellectual may be disregarded; when

Faith plucks such substantial fruit  
.  
.  
.  
.  
.  
She little needs to look beyond. (ll. 190-192.)

So Bishop Blougram in a somewhat different connection—

If you desire faith—then you've faith enough :  
What else seeks God—nay, what else seek ourselves?  
(*B.B.A.*, ll. 634-635.)

In the concluding lines of Section VII and in Section VIII is presented the contrast between the two opposing views. On the one hand, that of the man who is glad to accept the Christian faith as that best calculated for his advantage both in this world and in that to which he looks in the future. On the other hand, the view of the man who will take nothing on trust, who is "ever a fighter," and who, having

fought, and partially, though by no means wholly, vanquished his doubts, is prepared "to mount hardly to eternal life," at whatever cost of sacrifice and self-denial may be demanded of him. The criticism of the second speaker touching this proposed life of asceticism is that it is to be deprecated, not on account of the self-denial involved, but because such life ignores the bountiful provision of the Creator as evidenced in Nature. To abstain from the enjoyment of the gifts offered is an act of ingratitude towards the Provider. On the contrary, the Christian, whilst discerning love in every gift, should seek from his creed intensification rather than diminution of the joys of life : and in time of adversity when

Sorrows and privations take  
The place of joy,

the truths of Christianity shall throw upon the darkness the light of revelation, and

The thing that seems  
Mere misery, under human schemes,  
Becomes, regarded by the light  
Of love, as very near, or quite  
As good a gift as joy before. (ll. 216-221.)

(5) The arguments of this and the Section following are of special importance, since on them are based the charges of a too great asceticism which have been urged against the poem. Here, too, the dramatic element is more pronounced than elsewhere. The life of ease, physical and spiritual, to the second speaker a source of supreme gratification and happiness, to the man of sterner mould presents itself as an impossibility. "The all-stupendous tale" of the Gospel leaves him "pale and heartstruck." The belief that the sufferings there recorded were undergone for the purpose of intensifying the joys of life and affording consolation for its ills, is to him an explanation so inadequate as to approach

the verge of profanity. This being so he would demand of the advocate of the life of ease,

How do you counsel in the case?

The answer is characteristic:

I'd take, by all means, in your place,  
The *safe* side, since it so appears :  
Deny myself, a few brief years,  
The natural pleasure. (ll. 267-271.)

That the eternal reward will outweigh the temporal suffering to the exclusion even of recollection, the testimony of the martyr of the catacombs affords ample proof.

For me, I have forgot it all. (l. 288.)

(6) *If* this be so, then indeed there remains a direct and certain means of escape from sin, of fulfilment of the purposes of life—self-denial, renunciation. But, as the reply of Section X points out, the argument has been conducted in a circle, and the starting-point on the circumference has now been reached. The original statement has never been satisfactorily controverted. "How hard it is to be a Christian"; hard on account of the uncertainty bound to be attendant on all matters in which faith is requisite. It is hard to be a Christian since the difficulty but shifts its ground and is not actually removed by any venture of faith. After all argument, all reasoning, the possibility remains that the Christian's hope is a mistaken one; that death is not the gateway to fuller life but the annihilation of life; in short that the Christian has renounced life

For the sake  
Of death and nothing else. (ll. 296-297.)

In which case his gain is less than that of the worldling, since he has, at least, temporarily possessed the object towards the acquisition of which his self-denial was directed.

Beetles and snuff-boxes may be but small gains, but gains they are to whomso desires them : and "gain is gain, however small." Nevertheless, in the spirit of Browning, the wrestler with his doubts would rather risk all for the vaguest spiritual hope, than rest satisfied with a life limited to material gratification : rather be the grasshopper

That spends itself in leaps all day  
To reach the sun, (ll. 310-311.)

than the mole groping "amid its veritable muck." When Bishop Blougram makes the same decision—in favour of faith as opposed to scepticism—the motive he alleges is one which might well be ascribed to the second speaker of *Easter Day*. The choice is influenced, not by aspirations which refuse to be checked, but by considerations of prudence touching a possible future.

Doubt may be wrong—there's judgment, life to come!  
With just that chance, I dare not [*i.e.* relinquish faith]. (ll. 477-478.)

The attitude of the second speaker towards life generally recalls, indeed, not infrequently the professed opportunism of the Bishop. With Blougram also he fears the effects upon the stability of his faith of a critical investigation of its tenets. Hence, the reproach of Section XI, addressed to the first speaker, whose questionings threaten to disturb the earlier condition of "trusting ease." The reply of Section XII points out that, the eyes having been once opened, to close them wilfully, living in a determined reliance on hopes proved only too probably fallacious, is to adopt a pagan rather than a Christian conception of life.

II. Section XIII constitutes the introduction to the second part of the poem in which is given the history of the revelation to which the narrator ascribes his realization of the momentous nature of the faith which he and his companion



alike profess; and of the life which should be lived upon the lines of that faith. Vivid as the account of the Vision in *Christmas Eve* is the description by the first speaker of the experiences of the night preceding the dawn of Easter Day, three years ago; when, into the midst of his reflections touching the possibility of a near approach of a Day of Judgment, there broke that tremendous conflagration marking the crisis when man shall awaken to realities from

That insane dream we take  
For waking now, because it seems. (ll. 480-481.)

And the portrayal of the Judgment which follows is, in character, just that which we should expect from the pen of the writer who held that "the development of a soul, little else is worth study." How far the conception is indeed Browning's own will be best considered in estimating the extent of the dramatic element—in Lecture VI. To trace the history of this particular soul awaiting judgment is our immediate object. In a position of personal isolation from his kind, face to face with his Creator, to that lonely soul "began the Judgment Day." The sentence from without was unnecessary to him who should pass judgment upon himself.

The intuition burned away  
All darkness from [his] spirit too; (ll. 550-551.)

and he recognized in that moment of revelation that, whatever the uncertainty of his position before "the utmost walls of time" should "tumble in" to "end the world," in that moment was no uncertainty; his choice of life was fixed irrevocably. Hitherto he had loved the world too well to relinquish its joys wholly, whilst yet looking for a time when the renunciation, in which he believed to discern the highest course, should become possible: when he would at last "reconcile those lips"

To letting the dear remnant pass  
 . . . some drops of earthly good  
 Untasted! (ll. 583-585.)

In the light of that flash of intuition, it at once became clear that such an attitude of compromise had meant, in fact, a decision in favour of the world; a choice of things temporal to the virtual exclusion of things eternal. That he, too, had been doing that which he to-night reproaches the Christian of placid assurance for doing: he had been but using his faith "as a condiment" wherewith to "heighten the flavours" of life. The final issue being assured, the true relations of life and faith became manifest. The sentence of the voice beside him was unessential to the revelation

Life is done,  
 Time ends, Eternity's begun,  
 And thou art judged for evermore. (ll. 594-596.)

And yet "the shows of things" remain. No longer fire that

Would shrink  
 And wither off the blasted face  
 Of heaven, (ll. 524-526.)

but the common yet visible around, and the sky which above

Stretched drear and empty of life. (l. 601.)

In that vast stillness of earth and heaven, judgment is as emphatically pronounced as if read from "the opened book," in the presence of "the small and great," following "the rising of the quick and dead" which all prior conceptions of the Day of Judgment had led the spectator to anticipate. But he whose sentence had been passed was not of those whom

Bold and blind,  
 Terror must burn the truth into. (ll. 659-660.)

For these, *their* fate: such fate as the old Pope trusted

should awaken the criminal Franceschini to a realization of the horror and brutality of a deed which he sought to justify to himself and to the world, as an act of self-defence. Sentence is there passed in lines recalling, though with intensified force, the description of Section XV. Thus, the result of the papal reflections—

For the main criminal I have no hope  
 Except in such a suddenness of fate.  
 I stood at Naples once, a night so dark  
 I could have scarce conjectured there was earth  
 Anywhere, sky or sea or world at all:  
 But the night's black was burst through by a blaze—  
 Thunder struck blow on blow, earth groaned and bore,  
 Through her whole length of mountain visible:  
 There lay the city thick and plain with spires,  
 And, like a ghost disshrouded, white the sea.  
 So may the truth be flashed out by one blow,  
 And Guido see, one instant, and be saved.<sup>1</sup>

No such violence of retribution is here necessary. To the more finely tempered nature another fate. The choice between flesh and spirit having been decided, henceforth for the flesh the things of the flesh; for the spirit those of the spirit. The line of demarcation remains unalterable. For him who has chosen "the spirit's fugitive brief gleams," yearning for fuller light and life, for him shall those transitory gleams expand into complete and enduring radiance, and he shall "live indeed." For him who has but employed the spirit as an aid to the gratification of the flesh, using it to

Star the dome  
 Of sky, that flesh may miss no peak,  
 No nook of earth. (ll. 693-695.)

For him, as the inevitable outcome of the choice, shall the heaven of spirit be shut; the material world delivered over

<sup>1</sup> *The Pope*, 2117-2128.

for the full gratification of the senses. No sudden revelation of terror, no judgment by fire, but the permission—

Glut  
Thy sense upon the world: 'tis thine  
For ever—take it. (ll. 697-699.)

The hell designed for this man is one in which externals inevitably take no part. The world and its inhabitants apparently pursue their course, "as they were wont to do," before the time of probation was at an end. The sole difference is to be found in the spiritual outlook. The interest attaching to these things of time is no longer existent; no longer is the soul "visited by God's free spirit." Thus is again suggested that central doctrine of Browning's creed: the superlative worth of the individual soul in the divine scheme of the universe. "God is, thou art." From this it is only one step to the assurance,

The rest is hurled to nothingness for thee. (ll. 666-667.)

All upon which the eye rests has become for the spectator but an outward show, to be regarded with the consciousness that his own period of probation is for ever ended. It is, of course, in reference to this result of the judgment that in Section XIII the speaker questions the utility of a narration of his story; since if, on the one hand, the listener is actually alive, not to be numbered amongst the outward shows of things, then this fact is proof sufficient of the illusory character of the Vision. Yet, on the other hand, should the listener be "what I fear," that is, the presentation of a man passed already beyond his probationary phase of existence, then, in good sooth, will the

Warnings fray no one; (ll. 360-361.)

as they will convert no one. With him, the speaker, alone

rests the knowledge of the nature of his surroundings, and at times he, too, experiences the old uncertainty as to their true character.

And what the results following the Judgment? (a) At first, joy that all is now free of access where heretofore part only was attainable. *Nature* lies open not merely for the gratification of the senses, but to be studied by aid of science—

I stooped and picked a leaf of fern,  
And recollected I might learn  
From books, how many myriad sorts  
Of ferns exist (etc.). (ll. 738-741.)

Will not the vistas of "earth's resources," thus opening out before the lover of nature, prove composed of "vast exhaustless beauty, endless change of wonder?" Yes: but the Judgment has taught that which the term of probation failed to teach—that a genuine appreciation of these beauties was even then a possibility. Absolute renunciation was not essential to spiritual development: for that alone was needed the insight capable of looking beyond "the gift to the giver," beyond "the finite to infinity." Which could recognize in

All partial beauty—a pledge  
Of beauty in its plenitude. (ll. 769-770.)

The cause of life's failure, justifying condemnation, lay in an acceptance of the means as the end, of the pledge in place of the ultimate fulfilment. Now, absolute satiety being attained, the soul's ambition being bounded by the limits of earth, the plenitude of "those who looked above" is not for it.

(b) But if Nature refuses to yield the satisfaction demanded, the seeker for consolation would turn thence to a contemplation of *Art*, the works of which he holds as "supplant-

ing," mainly giving worth to Nature: Art which bears upon it the impress of human labour. And here again recurs the teaching of *Andrea del Sarto*, of *A Toccata of Galuppi's*, of *Old Pictures in Florence*, of *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, of *Cleon*: in short, of almost any of the more characteristic poems. In so far as these artists, to whom the lover of earth looks for satisfaction in his search for the beautiful, refused to recognize as binding the limitations imposed upon their work by temporary conditions: in so far as a sphere of higher development prepared for and awaiting them elsewhere. Undesirous of contemporary appreciation, the true artist is represented as fearing lest judgment should be passed upon that which he realizes to be but the imperfection denoting "perfection hid, reserved in part to grace" that after-time of labour, the existence of which the world ignores. He was

Afraid

His fellow men should give him rank  
By mere tentatives which he shrank  
Smitten at heart from, all the more,  
That gazers pressed in to adore. (ll. 791-795.)

And the speaker has been amongst the throng of spectators who accepted these "mere tentatives" as the consummation of the artist's powers. Thus with Art as with Nature, "the pledge sufficed his mood." Hence, in both relations—failure. Enjoyment, enjoyment to the full, of Art as of Nature was no impossibility, only, here too, with the sensuous gratification should have subsisted also the "spirit's hunger,"

Unsated—not unsatable. (ll. 860-861.)

Unsated, until the soul's true sphere shall have been attained. Now is that judgment pronounced which we find *Andrea del Sarto* passing upon himself whilst life and its opportunities yet remained his.



sibilities are also greater. Through the mind alone may come

Those intuitions, grasps of guess,  
Which pull the more into the less,  
Making the finite comprehend  
Infinity. (ll. 905-908.)

To genius have been granted from time to time glimpses of the spiritual world, made plain in moments of insight, yet not too plain. A world which, during his sojourn on earth, is intended not for man's permanent habitation. A world he must "traverse, not remain a guest in." Once capable of continuing a denizen of the spiritual world, the uses of earth as a training-ground would be for that man at an end. He who should so live would become a Lazarus, as the Arabian physician presents him to us; in Dr. Westcott's phrase, "not a man, but a sign." Brief visions of heaven are vouchsafed, that he who has once seen may "come back and tell the world," himself "stung with hunger" for the fuller light. As in Nature, as in Art, so, too, here in a more purely intellectual sphere, the pledge is not the plenitude, the symbol not the reality.

Since highest truth, man e'er supplied,  
Was ever fable on outside. (ll. 925-926.)

This, too, left unrealized; hence failure also here.

(d) The search for sensuous and for intellectual satisfaction having alike failed, is there no refuge for him whose lot is earth in its fulness? Yes, there is *Love*, Love which we saw the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve* recognizing as the "sole good of life on earth." So now the wearied soul recalls to mind, in the past,

How love repaired all ill,  
Cured wrong, soothed grief, made earth amends  
With parents, brothers, children, friends. (ll. 938-940.)



Hence the appeal for "leave to love only," made in full confidence of the divine approval. In place of approval, however, falls the reproof of Section XXX: the warning that all now left to the petitioner is "the show of love," since love itself has passed with the judgment. The "semblance of a woman," "departed love," "old memories," now alone survive of that which might have been all in all to the soul during its life's struggle. And here we find the man who has failed through a too exclusive devotion to things temporal taught, by this vision of the final judgment, the truth, at first accepted in *Christmas Eve* by the man who had looked through Nature to the God of Nature, and refused to worship in the "narrow shrines" of the temples made with hands. That love

Shall arise, made perfect, from death's repose of it.  
And I shall behold thee, face to face,  
O God, and in thy light retrace  
How in all I loved here, still wast thou! <sup>1</sup>

Thus the voice of judgment before the Easter dawn—

All thou dost enumerate  
Of power and beauty in the world,  
The mightiness of love was curled  
Inextricably round about.  
Love lay within it and without,  
To clasp thee. (ll. 960-965.)

But we saw the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve* ultimately rejecting this universal recognition of love in favour of the narrow shrine of Zion Chapel: acting, as he believed, with the divine approval. Again proof of the dramatic character of the poems. The lesson of life is variously interpreted by its different students.

Yet even here, where love is at length sought as the supreme good, the Voice of *Easter Day* proclaims once more

<sup>1</sup> *Christmas Eve*, 360-363.

—failure—and its cause, the inability to recognize the divine Love: the object of search is even now but human love.

Some semblance of a woman yet,  
With eyes to help me to forget,  
Shall look on me. (ll. 941-943.)

The love of "parents, brothers, children, friends": the seeker has stopped short of Pippa's final decision,<sup>1</sup> "Best love of all is God's." Why has he failed to realize this until Time has passed? Why, but because, with Cleon, he deemed it "a doctrine to be held by no sane man," that divine Love should prove commensurate with divine Power; that He "who made the whole," should love the whole, should

Undergo death in thy stead  
In flesh like thine. (ll. 974-975.)

But this scepticism, based upon the ground that in the Gospel story is found "too much love," is illogical, since it suggests by implication the belief of man that his fellow mortals, in whom he daily discerns abundant capacity for ill-will, have been yet capable of inventing a scheme of perfect love such as that involved in the history of the Incarnation. The doctrine that this was the divine work is assuredly less difficult of credence than that which assigns it to the invention of the human imagination? Disbelief on this the ground of "too much love," revealed in the Gospel story, is dealt with also by the Evangelist in *A Death in the Desert*. There, too, is presented a position similar to that occupied by the soliloquist of Easter Day. Through satiety, man

Has turned round on himself and stands,<sup>2</sup>  
Which in the course of nature is, to die.

When man demanded proof of the existence of a God, the

<sup>1</sup> *Pippa passes*, 114-180.

<sup>2</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 498-499.

representative of Power and Will, evidence of all was granted—

And when man questioned, "What if there be love  
 "Behind the will and might, as real as they?"—  
 He needed satisfaction God could give,  
 And did give, as ye have the written word.

But when the written word no longer sufficed, when (following the argument of this thirtieth Section of *Easter Day*) man believed himself to be the originator of love, when

Beholding that love everywhere,  
 He reasons, "Since such love is everywhere,  
 "And since ourselves can love and would be loved,  
 "We ourselves make the love, and Christ was not."

Then, asks the Evangelist,

How shall ye help this man who knows himself,  
 That he must love and would be loved again,  
 Yet, owning his own love that proveth Christ,  
 Rejecteth Christ through very need of Him?  
 The lamp o'erswims with oil, the stomach flags  
 Loaded with nurture, and that man's soul dies.<sup>1</sup>

The soliloquist of *Easter Day*, experiencing practically the position imagined by St. John, makes (with the opening of Section XXXI) a final appeal to the Love of God, that he may be permitted to continue in that uncertainty which, in the midst of "darkness, hunger, toil, distress," yet allows room for hope. Better the sufferings of unending struggle than the deadly calm of despair. To him who has experienced what satiety may bring, the life of probation offers powerful attractions. Whether the Vision may have been a reality or the creation of his own imagination, even this uncertainty is preferable to the judgment that shall grudge "no

<sup>1</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 500-513.

ease henceforth," whilst the soul is "condemned to earth for ever."

Thus the poem closes with the inevitable demand of the soul for progress, for growth; and the collateral recognition of its present life as a state of probation, hence of essential uncertainty—

Only let me go on, go on,  
Still hoping ever and anon  
To reach one eve the Better Land! (ll. 1001-1003.)

Feeble as is the hope at times, the dawn of Easter Day yet recalls the boundless possibilities opening out for human nature. And, for the moment at least, faith is paramount; no vague, impersonal belief, but that which looks for its direct inspiration to a living Christ.

Christ rises! Mercy every way  
Is Infinite,—and who can say?

## LECTURE VI

CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (iii)



## LECTURE VI

### CHRISTMAS EVE AND EASTER DAY (iii)

THE closer and more unprejudiced the study accorded it, the stronger becomes the conviction of the essentially dramatic character of the composition of both *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day*. And at first sight it may, to many readers, be matter of regret that this is so: to those readers more especially who had at first rejoiced to discover, in the assertions of the soliloquists, what they held to be an immediate assurance that Browning's faith was that form of dogmatic belief which was also theirs. If, in all honesty, we are compelled to renounce our original acceptance of the less complex nature of the poems, what is the worth, it may be asked, of the arguments which would unquestionably, were they the direct expression of the writer's feelings, stamp him as a devout Christian, prepared to make even "doubt occasion still more faith"? Nevertheless, further reflection minimizes the cause for regret. Although we may not accept without question, as Browning's own, the criticisms of the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve*, directed against the arguments of the humanitarian Lecturer, or the reasoning of the concluding Sections of *Easter Day*, in favour of belief in the Gospel story and in the essentially probationary character of human life; yet that which we have already had occasion to

notice as true concerning all dramatic work, is true also here. The expression of the author's own opinions is not necessarily excluded, as it is not necessarily implied. Thus, in the present instance, occur not a few passages in which it seems almost impossible that we should be in error in discerning Browning's own personality beneath the disguise of the speaker; the immediate expression of his own vital belief, in the theories advanced. And the passages seemingly thus directly inspired are those dealing with the permanent truths of life, which find at once embodiment and limitation in the dogma of various religious bodies. How far such passages may justly be accepted as non-dramatic in character can only be ascertained by reference to and comparison with treatment of these and similar subjects elsewhere in the works. We may not judge from one poem alone as to the writer's intention; evidence so obtained is insufficient.

I. In both *Christmas Eve* and *Easter Day* the most prominent position in the thoughts and dissertations of the soliloquist is necessarily—so the title would suggest—afforded the Doctrine of the Incarnation. Its introduction may not, in the single instance, be incontrovertibly significant as to Browning's attitude towards Christianity. But, when we find the same subject dealt with repeatedly from different points of view, by speakers widely separated from one another by time, place, nationality, and personal character; and when, in spite of the variety of external conditions, we yet find the arguments employed ever converging towards the same goal; here even the hypercritical student is surely bound to conclude that Browning did, indeed, realize, and was anxious to make plain his realization of, the value to the individual life of the belief involved, and of the intelligibility and reasonableness of such belief. To notice a few amongst the numerous aspects in which this Doctrine of the Incarnation has been



presented. In *Saul*, the logical inevitableness of its acceptance by the seeker after God, as revealed, first in Nature, then in His dealings with Humanity, is traced by the seer of a remote past before the historic fact has been accomplished. In *Cleon*, the demand for a direct revelation of God in man is the result of the cravings of a nature unable to rest satisfied in the merely deistic creed hitherto responsible for its theories of life. The very pagan character of the treatment of subject by the soliloquist, in this instance, is so handled by the poet as to lend additional force to the negative deductions from the suggestions advanced. In *An Epistle of Karshish*, once more as in *Saul*, the speaker, though an onlooker only where Christianity is concerned, is yet a believer in a divine order of the universe, and in a personal God revealed in His creation. The subject of which Karshish treats in his letter is no longer, however, as with David, an expectation to be realized in a distant future, but a matter comprehending a series of historic events recently enacted. Nevertheless, he too, whilst nominally rejecting the evidence of the witnesses as to fact, forces upon the reader the conviction that not only is it possible, but inevitable, that the "All-Great" shall be "the All-Loving too"; and must have revealed His love through the life lived by the Physician of Galilee, whose deeds Lazarus reported. Later, when that Life has become still further a thing of the past, when "what first were guessed as points," have become known as "stars," in *A Death in the Desert* are put into the mouth of the dying Evangelist, St. John, arguments which reach the final culmination towards which those of David and of Cleon alike tended. And St. John, in imagination confronting opponents of Christianity, sees not only his own contemporaries, but those of Browning: his reasoning would refute not so much the heresy of the Gnostics of the first and second centuries of the Christian era

as the criticisms of German literary men of the nineteenth. And here, too, is attained the same result as that of the foregoing instances—proof of the inevitableness of an Incarnation, and of such an Incarnation as that of the Gospel story, in any definite and clearly formulated scheme of human life. Thus then, when we turn to *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* to find again, in the conclusions reached, not only the outcome of the suggestions and arguments of David, of Karshish, and of Cleon, but, further, a position occupied by the speaker closely akin to that held in imagination by the Evangelist; we can hardly fail to be justified in believing that Browning cared sufficiently for the subject under consideration to wish to present it to his public in those varying lights which should afford proof of its universal import, and confirm, if possible, credence in its absolute truth. To refuse, indeed, to allow due weight to the evidence thus obtained, would be to neglect the best available opportunities for estimating the true nature of the beliefs of a dramatic author; since it is necessarily by such indirect and comparative methods alone that it is possible to ascertain their character. In this exposition, then, of the fundamental truths of Christianity, as set forth by the soliloquist in either poem, we may reasonably believe ourselves to be listening to authorized assertions and arguments.

II. Again is the voice of Browning himself unmistakably heard in the acceptance by both speakers in *Easter Day* (although with different practical results in each case) of the inevitable extinction of faith as a necessary consequence of absolute certainty in matters spiritual. It is, in fact, but another form of the constantly advanced theory of the progressive character of human nature, involving a recognition of the world as a training-ground, mortal life as a probation. A theory finding expression in terms more or less pronounced

throughout Browning's literary career ; from the suggestions, dramatic in form, of *Pauline*, 1833, to the direct personal assertions of the *Asolando Epilogue* in 1889. Whether it be in the *individual* aspiration of the lover of *Pauline*,

How should this earth's life prove my only sphere?  
Can I so narrow sense but that in life  
Soul still exceeds it? (ll. 634-636.)

or in the final estimate of *the race* by Paracelsus—

Upward tending all though weak,  
Like plants in mines which never saw the sun,  
But dream of him, and guess where he may be,  
And do their best to climb and get to him. (*Par.*, v, ll. 883-886.)

The same belief, whilst it inspires the utterances of Pompilia and of Abt Vogler, of the Grammarian and the lover of *Evelyn Hope*, is likewise discernible as underlying, though possibly less consciously instigating the reflections of Luria and of the organist of *Master Hugues of Saxe-Gotha*, of Andrea del Sarto and of the victim of a prudence outweighing love, in *Dis Aliter Visum*. And progress is the recognized law of Faith as of Life. The existence of Truth, absolute, does not preclude its gradual revelation and realization. In the *Epilogue* to the *Dramatis Personae*, Browning, by the mouth of the "Third Speaker," would point out that the lamentation of Rénan over a vanished faith is unwarranted by fact since, Truth existing in its entirety, the peculiar revelations of Truth are adapted to each successive stage of the development of the human race. Hence "that Face," the vestige even of which the "Second Speaker" held to be "lost in the night at last,"

That one Face, far from vanish, rather grows,  
Or decomposes but to recompose,  
Become my universe that feels and knows.

A fuller realization of Truth has become possible in these later days than in the past of Jewish ritual, when

The presence of the Lord,  
*In the glory of His cloud,*  
 Had filled the House of the Lord.

Of *Easter Day* it has been remarked in this connection, "If Mr. Browning has meant to say . . . that religious certainties are required for the undeveloped mind, but that the growing intelligence walks best by a receding light, he denies the positive basis of Christian belief."<sup>1</sup> Comparing this criticism with the treatment in *A Death in the Desert* of the subject of faith in relation to the Incarnation, it becomes sufficiently clear that an acceptance of "the positive basis of Christian belief" was to Browning's mind perfectly compatible, not indeed with "a receding light," but with that absence of certainty in matters spiritual which the First Speaker of *Easter Day* accepts as inevitable. And surely the suggestion in *Easter Day*, as elsewhere in Browning, is that the development of the "religious intelligence" is best advanced, not by a *receding light*, but by that ever-increasing illuminative power which shall effect gradually the revelation presented in the Vision of the Judgment as the work of a moment. The revelation of the true relation between things temporal and spiritual, between the divine and the human. For, whilst St. John bases his arguments upon the central assurance that "God the Truth" is, of all things, alone unchangeable, immediately upon the assurance follows the assertion—

Man apprehends Him newly at each stage  
 Whereat earth's ladder drops, its service done.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters of Robert Browning*, Mrs. Sutherland Orr, Smith, Elder and Co., p. 185.

<sup>2</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 431-433.

Since "such progress" as is the peculiar characteristic of human nature

Could no more attend his soul  
Were all it struggles after found at first  
And guesses changed to knowledge absolute,  
Than motion wait his body, were all else  
Than it the solid earth on every side,  
Where now, through space he moves from rest to rest.<sup>1</sup>

Thus with Christianity itself

Will [man] give up fire  
For gold or purple once he knows its worth?  
Could he give Christ up were His worth as plain?  
Therefore, I say, to test man, the proofs shift,  
Nor may he grasp that fact like other fact,  
And straightway in his life acknowledge it,  
As, say, the indubitable bliss of fire.<sup>2</sup>

The effect on human nature and life of the change of "guesses" to "knowledge absolute" is elsewhere exhibited in concrete form where Lazarus, in *An Epistle of Karshish*, is represented, as Browning's imagination would visualize him, in the years succeeding his resurrection from the dead. There the need for faith is accounted as no longer existing. During those four days of the spirit's sojourn beyond the limits of the visible world, the unveiled light of eternity had thrown into their true relative positions the things of time. Thenceforth, for him who had once *known*, the hopes and fears attendant upon uncertainty were no longer a possibility. In view of that which is eternal, temporal prosperity or adversity had become of small moment. The advance of a hostile force upon the sacred city, centre of the national life, was to the risen nature an event trifling as "the passing of a mule with gourds." Sickness, death, were alike met by the

<sup>1</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 589-594.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 292-298.

imperturbable "God wills." Yet this apparently immovable serenity was at once overthrown by contact with "ignorance and carelessness and sin." To the non-Christian onlooker, the attitude thus attained was attributable to the peculiar condition of life by which heaven was

Opened to a soul while yet on earth,  
Earth forced on a soul's use while seeing heaven.

The man capable of this two-fold vision had indeed become but "a sign," noteworthy it is true, yet of little value as a practical example to his fellows, since what held good in this single and unprecedented case must be of no avail as a criterion for the multitude.

The importance, as an educative instrument, of the demands on faith made by the absence of overwhelmingly conclusive and unalterable evidence in matters spiritual, is again illustrated in that remarkable little poem *Fears and Scruples*, following *Easter Day* after an interval of more than a quarter of a century (pub. 1876). The writer there declares his personal preference for the condition of life ultimately the choice of the First Speaker, in which uncertainty may admit of hope, even though the future should prove such hope fallacious. The old theory is advanced beneath the illustration of relationship to an absent friend, proofs of whose affection, of whose very existence, rest upon the evidence of letters, the genuineness of which has been called in question by experts. Nevertheless, the friend at home, the soliloquist of the poem, refuses to yield credence to calumny. His faith in the friend, if misplaced, has been hitherto a source of spiritual elevation and inspiration. Even though the truth be ultimately proved but falsehood, he is yet the better for those days in which he deemed it truth. Therefore,

One thing's sure enough: 'tis neither frost,  
 No, nor fire, shall freeze or burn from out me  
 Thanks for truth—though falsehood, gained—though lost.

All my days, I'll go the softlier, sadlier,  
 For that dream's sake! How forget the thrill  
 Through and through me as I thought "The gladlier  
 Lives my friend because I love him still!"

The parallel is enforced by the suggestion at the close—

Hush, I pray you!

What if this friend happen to be—God? (*F. and S.*, viii, ix, xii.)

III. In considering the position of the First Speaker in *Easter Day*, we have already noticed the character of the final judgment, the nature of the Hell designed for the punishment of him who had chosen the things of the flesh in preference to the things of the spirit.—A Hell consisting in absolute future exclusion from opportunities of spiritual satisfaction and development.—A judgment which we remarked in passing, as peculiarly characteristic in its conception of Browning's usual treatment of matters relative to the spiritual life of man. In *Ferishtah's Fancies*, we are able to obtain direct confirmation of this suggestion, with reference to the subject actually in question. In reading this collection of poems, the work of the author's later life (pub. 1884), we hardly need his warning (or so at least we believe) to avoid the assumption that "there is more than a thin disguise of a few Persian names and allusions." Sheltering himself thus behind the imagined personality of the Persian historian, Browning, in his seventy-second year, gave freer utterance than was customary with him to his own opinions and beliefs touching certain momentous questions of Life and Faith. *A Camel-driver* is devoted to a discussion of the doctrine of Judgment and Future Punishment of the sins committed in the flesh. Ferishtah, as Dervish, submits that here, as in all allied matters, man with finite capacities cannot conceive

of the infinite purpose. Knowing "but man's trick to teach," he does but reason from the character of his own dealings, in this respect, with the animals, as creatures of lower intelligence, employed in his service. The general conclusions from the arguments thus deduced are, in brief: (1) The punishment as regards the sufferer is not designed to be retributive only, but remedial and reformatory in character. (2) With respect to the sinner and his fellow mortals, it must be deterrent. (3) Hence, to be effective, its infliction should be immediate rather than future. By postponement, the exemplary effect of punishment is rendered void: the connection between offence and penalty is obscured, and sympathy with the sufferer will result, rather than avoidance of the offence for which the suffering is inflicted. Such is the estimate by Ferishtah, or Browning, of the punishment of a future Hell of fire. From a merely human point of view it is illogical. For the purification of the sinner, or for the admonition of the onlooker, it is alike useless. And the deduction? Man can but work and, therefore, teach as man, and not as God. At best he may but see a little way into the Eternal purpose: into that portion alone which is revealed through the experiences of mortal life. Here he must be content to rest without further speculation.

Before man's First, and after man's poor Last,  
God operated, and will operate,

is the assertion of Reason. To which adds Ferishtah,

Process of which man merely knows this much,—  
That nowise it resembles man's at all,  
Teaching or punishing.

For the character of the divine process:—as in *Easter Day*, so here the penalty is immediately adjusted to the peculiar requirements of the nature to be "taught or punished."



To the man of spiritual discernment, of right thought and purpose, but of imperfect performance, no hell is needed beyond that to be found in the comparison of the Might-have-been with the Has-been and the Is. And in this sadness of retrospect are to be remembered, too, the sins of ignorance; even forgiveness is powerless to efface wholly the misery of remorse. Thus shall Omnipotence deal with the individual soul. Thus does the work of judgment and of education differ essentially from that of man who "lumps his kind i' the mass," passing upon the mass sentence, involving a uniformity of punishment, which must fall in individual cases with varying degrees of intensity, by no means proportionate to the magnitude of the offences committed. That which to the sensitive soul is torture unfathomable, to the "bold and blind" is as naught. By some other method must be forced on *him* the recognition and realization of past sin. Terror may "burn in the truth," where the recollection of irremediable evil has failed to create remorse. Only a mind incapable of spiritual discernment would award a similar penalty for a life's faults of omission and commission to the several inmates of the Morgue, and to the onlooker who would see, in the temporary despair which had caused the end, failure apparent, not absolute. For his part he could but deem that the misery which had resulted in an overwhelming abhorrence of life had, in itself, been punishment sufficient; he could but think "their sin's atoned."<sup>1</sup> Yet in his own case, even though he held that "we fall to rise," those falls from which no human life may be wholly exempt, were in themselves cause more than adequate for remorseful anguish without the super-addition of external penalty:

<sup>1</sup> *Apparent Failure.*

Forgiveness? rather grant  
 Forgetfulness! The past is past and lost.  
 However near I stand in his regard,  
 So much the nearer had I stood by steps  
 Offered the feet which rashly spurned their help.  
 That I call Hell; why further punishment?<sup>1</sup>

IV. So far we have only treated of conclusions which, by comparison with other poems obviously dramatic, and with his more avowedly confessed opinions elsewhere, we have felt ourselves justified in accepting as Browning's own. Turning to the questions yet remaining for consideration, we are upon more debatable ground. But here, too, pursuing similar methods, we may expect the results to be also decisive in so far as our means of investigation will allow. To what extent did personal feeling influence the criticism of Roman Catholic ritual contained in *Christmas Eve*? In what degree may Browning be held to have sympathized with the final decision in favour of the creed of Zion Chapel? An answer to the first question involves at least a partial answer to the second. Browning's attitude, could it be accurately estimated, towards Roman Catholicism, might be decisive as to how far it was possible for him to concur in the conclusions attributed to the soliloquist as the result of his night's experience.

With regard to external evidence touching Browning's opinions on any given question, it is usually of so conflicting a character as to leave us still in the condition of mental indecision in which we began the enquiry. In the present instance we have the report to which reference has been already made of the author's own assertion respecting *Bishop Blougram's Apology*; that he intended no hostility, and felt none towards the Roman Catholic Church. On the other side of the argument has to be reckoned the reply to Miss

<sup>1</sup> *A Camel-driver.*

Barrett's wish, expressed in the early days of their acquaintance, that he would give direct utterance to his own opinions, not sheltering himself behind his various *dramatis personae*. Whilst promising to accede to the request, he adds, "I don't think I shall let *you* hear, after all, the savage things about Popes and imaginative religions that I must say." This correspondence took place five years before *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* was published. To the year of publication is to be referred the author's satirical observation on the premature proclivities evinced by his infant son, during a visit to Siena, towards church interiors and ritual. "It is as well," he remarked, "to have the eye-teeth and the Puseyistical crisis over together." Of this comment writes Professor Dowden, to whom we have been recently indebted for so much valuable light on Browning's life and work: "Although no more than a passing word spoken in play [it] gives a correct indication of Browning's feeling, fully shared by his wife, towards the religious movement in England, which was altering the face of the Established Church. 'Puseyism' was for them a kind of child's play, which unfortunately had religion for its playground; they viewed it with a superior smile, in which there was more of pity than of anger."<sup>1</sup> It was, indeed, as we have already had occasion to notice, in the nature of things unlikely that Browning should have remained uninfluenced by the spirit of anxiety and unrest, agitating the minds of English churchmen of all grades of thought during the years which succeeded the Tractarian movement. That this should have led him to assume an attitude of distrust towards the Roman Catholic Church is hardly matter for surprise; that it was one of hostility he himself denies. And

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, E. Dowden, J. M. Dent and Co., pp. 121, 123.

it is a satisfaction to believe that *The Pope* section of *The Ring and the Book* was the more matured expression of his feeling in this connection. The most valuable *internal* evidence on the subject is probably to be derived from a comparison of this poem and *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, with Section X-XII, and XXII of *Christmas Eve*.

In *Bishop Blougram's Apology*, as in *The Pope*, all direct reference to the Church is made from *within*, not from *without*. The speaker is no critical onlooker, but, as we have seen, a prelate noted alike for his ultramontane tendencies, and for the breadth of his views with regard to the adaptability of his Church to the developments of contemporary intellectual life. This man is a leading member of the religious community for which Browning is accused of having in *Christmas Eve* expressed his aversion. But, although a leading member, he is not therefore to be judged as a typical representative; his marked individuality being doubtless a main cause of the author's choice of subject. And what does this man say in defence of his Church? He points out that a profession before the world of faith, clearly defined and absolute, is essential to his influence and authority. Whatever the searchings of heart, the doubts and questionings inevitable to a keenly logical and analytic intellect, these must be concealed, lest the priest should be accounted a pretender, his profession a cloak of hypocrisy. His belief in the latest ecclesiastical miracle must be as avowedly absolute as that in a God as Creator and Supreme Ruler of the Universe. Thus he stands firm upon the ground which he has chosen. The question is throughout a personal one, and the implication is clearly not intended that the Roman Catholic Church would *necessarily* demand of its members this implicit credence, would thus closely fetter the intellectual faculties.

Turning to *Christmas Eve*, we find the case reversed, and the soliloquist occupying the position of one of those outsiders to whom the Bishop believed himself compelled to present an unquestioning and unquestionable orthodoxy. For the Prelate is substituted the man of active critical instinct, inclined to pass judgment with data insufficient to prove a satisfactory basis for the decision: of perceptions readily responsive to the glories of nature and their inspiration: but, we surely are not wrong in adding, of imaginative faculty unequal to the realization of those spiritual suggestions afforded to minds of different calibre by the symbolism of a ritualistic worship. The solemn silence of the vast crowd assembled in the cathedral makes stronger appeal to his sympathies than does the gorgeous display of ritual following. Hence it is a not illogical outcome of the position that he will but hear in the music of the service "hog-grunts and horse-neighings"; that he will but see in the ceremonial observed "buffoonery—posturings and petticoatings." This man of spiritual and intellectual capacity so far developed is yet numbered amongst the congregation of the Calvinistic meeting-house, where the preacher is without erudition, the flock of mental outlook metaphorically as limited as the space bounded by the four walls within which they are assembled. How is the presence of this presumably unsympathetic personality to be accounted for in their midst? How otherwise than by the recognition of this peculiar deficiency in the nature which, whilst leaving it capable of looking directly upwards to the God of all creeds, yet renders it unable, in looking downwards, to see below the surface, and realize the worth of symbolism in worship where spiritual insight is not of the keenest. The utterance of the *Third Speaker* of the *Epilogue*<sup>1</sup> may well be his as

<sup>1</sup> *Dramatis Personae.*

he awaits the coming of the Vision on the common without the Chapel:

Why, where 's the need of Temple, when the walls  
O' the world are that?

And in his anxiety to avoid the "narrow shrines" of man's erection, he is ultimately driven to worship at one of the narrowest, chosen because the veil of ritual there interposed between the worshipper and his God is of the thinnest. The urgency of the desire to be freed from all outward ceremonial causes him to overlook the real faults of spiritual pride and exclusiveness characteristic of the Calvinistic congregation. True of heart, he would reject all shows of things; but there is in his nature a Puritanic strain which refuses to be eradicated, and this it is which finally leads him to become a member of the religious community whose failings he at first unsparingly condemned.

V. No stronger proof of the dramatic power of the poem is, perhaps, to be found than that afforded by the criticism quoted below, to which it has seemed almost impossible to avoid reference, bearing as it does the highest literary authority. Browning appears here to be regarded as occupying the position assigned by him to the soliloquist, so completely has he succeeded in identifying himself with his *dramatis persona*. "Of English nonconformity in its humblest forms Browning can write, as it were, from within" [the soliloquist has become a member of the Calvinistic congregation when he narrates his experiences]; "he writes of Roman Catholic forms of worship as one who stands outside" [the position literally and metaphorically assigned to the critic on the threshold-stone of St. Peter's]; "his sympathy with the prostrate multitude in St. Peter's at Rome is of an impersonal kind, founded rather upon the recognition

of an objective fact than springing from an instinctive feeling' [May not the sympathy capable of inspiring the closing lines of Section X be taken as indicative of something deeper than this?]. "For a moment he is carried away by the tide of their devout enthusiasms; but he recovers himself to find, indeed, that love is also here, and therefore Christ is present, but the worshippers fallen under 'Rome's gross yoke,' are very infants in their need of these sacred buffooneries and posturings and petticoatings. . . . And this, though the time has come when love would have them no longer infantile, but capable of standing and walking, 'not to speak of trying to climb.' Such a short and easy method of dealing with Roman Catholic dogma and ritual cannot be commended for its intelligence; it is quite possible to be on the same side as Browning without being as crude as he is in misconception. He does not seriously consider the Catholic idea which regards things of sense as made luminous by the spirit of which they are the envoys and the ministers. It is enough for him to declare his own creed, which treats any intermediary between the human soul and the Divine as an obstruction or a veil." Then after quoting the passage describing the soliloquist's final choice: "This was the creed of Milton and of Bunyan; and yet with both Milton and Bunyan the imagery of the senses is employed as the means, not of concealing, but revealing the things of the spirit."<sup>1</sup> Was it not just this inability to seriously consider the things of sense as made luminous by the spirit which Browning wishes to represent as accounting for the otherwise unaccountable presence of the man of culture and intellect in Zion Chapel? Surely to the characteristic weaknesses of the soliloquist, not to the crude misconception of the author, is

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, E. Dowden, pp. 128-129.

attributable the intolerance of the criticism, whether directed, as in the earlier Sections, against the congregation of Zion Chapel, or, in the later, against that of St. Peter's?

This belief in the strength of the dramatic element in *Christmas Eve* is confirmed when we turn to *The Ring and the Book*, and the question suggests itself—Would the critic of the earlier poem have been capable of representing any member of the Church which he condemns in the light in which Browning gives us Innocent XII? A nature to which is possible in age the purity and simplicity of a childlike personal faith.

O God,  
Who shall pluck sheep Thou holdest, from Thy hand?  
(*The Pope*, ll. 641-642.)

Of a tenderness which yearns in memory over the defenceless member of his flock, lately the victim of brutality and disappointed avarice.

Pompilia, then as now  
Perfect in whiteness. . . . (ll. 1005-1006.)  
. . . . My flower,  
My rose, I gather for the breast of God. (ll. 1046-1047.)

With tenderness is coupled that humility which can say to this child of the Faith:

Go past me  
And get thy praise,—and be not far to seek  
Presently when I follow if I may! (ll. 1092-1094.)

Stoop thou down, my child,  
Give one good moment to the poor old Pope  
Heart-sick at having all his world to blame. (ll. 1006-1008.)

Yet, in spite of the heart-sickness, is present also the moral rectitude which refuses to shrink from the task demanding fulfilment—the censure of “all his world”—from the archbishop who repulsed the injured wife's appeal for protection,



"the hireling who did turn and flee," through the entire list of offenders to the "fox-faced, horrible priest, this brother-brute, the Abate," and the chief criminal, Guido, for whom also his friends would claim clerical immunity from the penalty attaching to his offence. Realizing to the full the character of his office, the weight of authority and historical continuity lying behind, the old Pope might well be tempted to grant to the miscreants that shelter which they crave. But the very fact which leads him to magnify the dignity of his official position, "next under God," leads him also to recognize the immensity of personal responsibility attaching thereto. The sentence to be passed is the outcome of a *personal* decision.

How should I dare die, this man let live?

Yet whilst laying bare before his mental vision the evils existent in his Church, obvious alike in the individual even though he should himself "have armed and decked him for the fight"; and in the communal life of convent and monastery; whilst rejoicing that Caponsacchi should have had the necessary courage to break through ecclesiastical convention and

Let light into the world

Through that irregular breach o' the boundary: (ll. 1205-1206.)

he yet points to the strength of the Church as safeguarding, by her rule as "a law of life," those whose natural impulses may not be relied on to lead them to follow the course of Caponsacchi, and to whom it would not be safe to grant the permission: "Ask *your* hearts as *I* asked mine." To these and such as these the law of life laid down by the Church's rule is essential. Whatever the traditions of the past, whatever the possibilities of ecclesiastical modifications and developments in the future, in the present no considerations

of personal interest or compassion must be permitted to warp the judgment of him who is armed

With Paul's sword as with Peter's key.

And it is to be remembered, that the man who could thus reason, thus decide, was head of that Church which excited the mocking condemnation of the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve*: and that Caponsacchi, "the warrior-priest, the soldier-saint," bore likewise the title of Canon. To so remember may serve to cast new light upon Browning's supposed attitude towards Roman Catholicism.

VI. The most important subject of discussion in relation to *Easter Day* is that touching its so-called asceticism. Here also, as in *Christmas Eve*, two interdependent questions must be asked: (1) What is the *nature* of the asceticism advocated by the First Speaker? (2) How far may it be regarded as the expression of Browning's own theory of life? A plain answer to the first question is necessary in order that, by comparison with the treatment of the same subject elsewhere, it may be possible to determine the extent to which the opinions advanced are in agreement: whether Browning was desirous of advocating renunciation even in the degree held essential by the First Speaker. The key to the position seems to be contained in two recorded comments on the poem by the poet and his wife. When Mrs. Browning complained of the "asceticism," her husband answered, that it stated "*one side* of the question." Her supplementary observation adds, "It is his way to *see* things as passionately as other people *feel* them."<sup>1</sup> It was by the exercise of this exceptionally powerful imaginative faculty that the author of *Easter Day* has dramatically stated the case which he perceived might be made out for renuncia-

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, Dowden, p. 132.

tion, as well as for grateful acceptance and enjoyment of the gifts of life. If we admit the accuracy of the criticism which would define the spirit of the poem as refusing to recognize, "in poetry or art, or the attainments of the intellect, or even in the best human love, any practical correspondence with religion,"<sup>1</sup> then indeed we are bound to acknowledge that it stands absolutely alone in Browning's work and is in direct opposition to his theory of life. I venture to think, however, that a careful study of this particular aspect of the poem will result in the conviction that the First Speaker is represented as realizing that, desirable as is renunciation in his own case, it is not the highest course possible to human nature.

Sections VIII, XVI, XX, XXIV, XXX, are those which deal chiefly with this question of asceticism. Taken in sequence, they present in outline the history of the spiritual life of the First Speaker. This it is desirable to notice very briefly before comparing the rule of life thus indicated with that suggested by references to Browning's work elsewhere. In Section VIII is depicted the attitude of the First Speaker towards the Gospel story; the attitude of "the fighter" who would not only wrestle with evil, but would search for any possibly existent danger and bring it to light (Section XIV). To such a nature the intellectual belief in the Incarnation—"the all-stupendous tale—that Birth, that Life, that Death!" is productive of heartstruck horror: whilst for a practical acceptance of the faith, life must be regulated in accordance with Scriptural teaching, expressed in

Certain words, broad, plain,  
Uttered again and yet again,  
Hard to mistake or overgloss—(*E.D.*, viii, ll. 257-259.)

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<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters of Browning*, Mrs. S. Orr, p. 185.

words which declare that the loss of things temporal is the gain of things spiritual and eternal. But the asceticism thus advocated does not find full explanation until Section XXX. The gradual revelation begins with Section XVI where, before judgment has been pronounced from without, conscience passes sentence upon itself; realizing that that which it had deemed in life a mere temporizing, had in fact been a final choice. That, dallying with the good things of life, whilst believing renunciation the higher course, had meant a practical decision in favour of things temporal to the exclusion of things spiritual. In that exclusion lay the error. And the recognition of failure here is in entire accordance with Browning's usual attitude towards life. Condemnation is merited not on account of indulgence, but because that indulgence had meant running counter to the convictions of the man who held that, for him, renunciation was the higher course. Not possessing the courage of his opinions, he had chosen that which he recognized as the lower course, the path of compromise: enjoyment in the present, renunciation before it was too late. Therefore for him who had so chosen—the Hell of Satiety.

Now, as we have already noticed,<sup>1</sup> the experience of the results of the Judgment tended to exhibit the true worth, both absolute and relative, of the things amid which life had been hitherto passed. Satiety checked enjoyment of the beauties of Nature. Why should this be? In Section XXIV is given the answer:

All partial beauty was a pledge  
Of beauty in its plenitude.

But, engrossed in contemplation of the partial beauty the

<sup>1</sup> *Supra*, pp. 135-145.

spectator had found that "the pledge sufficed [his] mood." Therefore, the plenitude was not for him, but for those only who had looked above and beyond the pledge, seeking that of which it was a proof. And in each of the successive attempts towards happiness by an appeal to art, and to the exercise of the higher intellectual faculties, the same explanation of failure is vouchsafed by the Judge. The symbol has been accepted for the reality, the pledge for the fulfilment. After the final choice has been made in favour of Love, "leave to love only," the fuller explanation follows; the secret of life's success or failure. Failure through the inability to recognize the Divine Love in the visible creation, or in the more immediate revelation to man: in either case ample proof being afforded to him who had eyes to see, intelligence to grasp, and heart to respond to the Love so taught. Yet the soliloquist of *Easter Day* had proved himself incapable of such recognition of the highest truth. The world of sense had been used not to subserve but to supersede the world of spirit. To the nature which thus found in all externals a temptation to rest content with "the level and the night," asceticism was as essential to the preservation of the spiritual life as, under certain conditions, amputation may be to the preservation of physical life.

But it must not be overlooked that the necessity for amputation implies the existence of mortal disease. Hence, whilst realizing this personal necessity for renunciation, the speaker recalls the teaching of the divine Judge of the Vision as pointing to a higher standard of life for him who should be able to attain to it. A life in which all things should be not avoided as a snare, but accepted as cause for thankfulness; the relation of the gift to the Giver being recognized as constituting its primary value. To the lover of the beautiful is pointed out how

All thou dost enumerate  
Of power and beauty in the world,  
The mightiness of love was curled  
Inextricably round about.  
Love lay within it and without,  
To clasp thee,—but in vain! (*E.D.*, xxx, ll. 960-965.)

In this passage may be found the solution to the whole question of the asceticism advocated. When the love thus expressed had been realized, the step was not a difficult one to the acceptance of the fuller revelation of Love in the Incarnation. And in this realization the highest aspect of life temporal would have been reached. Love, not abrogating the law would have served as its fulfilment. As the statements of Bishop Blougram are personal in relation to the treatment of doubt, so the speaker in *Easter Day* would make out a case for personal asceticism. Not advocating it as the ideal universal course, he would yet claim for it highest value as safeguarding his individual life. To him who is incapable of moderation, renunciation may become a necessity; yet, through renunciation, may be attained that higher life consisting in a grateful enjoyment and generous communication of all gifts of the Divine Love.

Of the other poems dealing with this subject indirectly or directly, *Paracelsus*, 1835, *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, 1864, *Ferishtah's Fancies*, 1884, are sufficiently representative of the different periods of the poet's literary life to render them valuable as illustrations of his mode of treatment. In the last, at least, we may be fairly confident that the decision given is his own.

In one aspect *Paracelsus* may be regarded as the history of a man of genius who marked out for himself a career of complete asceticism; of work apart from human sympathy, love, and friendship, as well as from all gratifications of the

flesh. And the scheme was pursued unflinchingly—for a time—until the inevitable reaction set in, spirit and flesh alike avenging themselves for their temporary suppression. Not only are love and friendship found claiming their own, but

A host of petty wild delights, undreamed of  
Or spurned before, (*Par.*, iii, ll. 537-538.)

offer themselves to supply the place of what the earlier ascetic, in a moment of despairing self-contempt, terms his “dead aims.” The declaration at Colmar is made whilst the influence of reaction still prevails.

I will accept all helps; all I despised  
So rashly at the outset, equally  
With early impulses, late years have quenched.

. . . . .  
All helps! no one sort shall exclude the rest.

(*Par.*, iv, ll. 235-239.)

Only when he has learned from experience that human nature is not to be developed through suppression, that “its sign and note and character” are “Love, hope, fear, faith”—that “these make humanity,” only then can he fearlessly, as in youth, “press God’s lamp to [his] breast,” assured of the divine guidance and protection.

*Sordello*, so closely allied to *Paracelsus* in time of composition (pub. 1840, begun before *Strafford*, 1836), demands a brief reference since it has been especially singled out for notice in this connection as constituting “an indirect vindication of the conceptions of human life which *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* condemns.”<sup>1</sup> In the *Sixth Book* of *Sordello* the question of renunciation has become imminent and practical. It is the moment for decision. The imperial badge which he tells his soul “would suffer you improve your Now!”

<sup>1</sup> *Browning*, Mrs. S. Orr, pp. 185-186.

must be accepted or rejected: and with it the attendant temporal advantages. But the reflections occupying the poet's mind, at this crisis of his fate, are akin to those following the Vision of the Judgment in *Easter Day*. Why not enjoy life to the full? Why treat it as a mere ante-room to the palace at the door of which stands the Usher, Death? Even accepting the simile

I, for one,  
Will praise the world, you style mere ante-room  
To palace.

. . . . .  
Oh, 'twere too absurd to slight  
For the hereafter the to-day's delight.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the thought recurs, how often has the cup of life been set aside by "sage, champion, martyr," to whom had been revealed the secret of that which "masters life." To what causes is attributable the failure which he recognizes in reviewing his own Past? The soul, true inhabitant of the Infinite, has been unable to adapt itself to its lodgment in the body fitted, by its constitution, for Time only. Sorrow has been the inevitable result of the soul's attempts at subjecting the body to its use. Sorrow to be avoided only when the employer shall

Match the thing employed,  
Fit to the finite his infinity.<sup>2</sup>

Some solution of the difficulty there must assuredly be. The question of *Sordello* is in different form the question of the soliloquist of *Easter Day*—

Must life be ever just escaped which should  
Have been enjoyed?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Sordello*, Book the Sixth.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*



And the answer?—

Nay, might have been and would,  
Each purpose ordered right—the soul's no whit  
Beyond the body's purpose under it.<sup>1</sup>

Yet the struggle ends in *renunciation*, and Salinguerra arrives to find Sordello dead, "under his foot the badge": but

Still, Palma said,  
A triumph lingering in the wide eyes.<sup>2</sup>

In *Rabbi Ben Ezra* a more material conception of life is to be expected from the change in the personality of the soliloquist. The Jewish Rabbi of the twelfth century takes the place of the Mantuan poet of the thirteenth. The Rabbi also recognizes the limitations imposed by the body upon the development of the soul.

Pleasant is this flesh,  
Our soul, in its rose-mesh  
Pulled ever to the earth, still yearns for rest. (*R.B.E.*, xi.)

Thy body at its best,  
How far can that project thy soul on its lone way? (viii.)

Yet, since "gifts should prove their use," he would, in so far as may be, utilize the body for the advancement of the soul.

Let us not always say  
"Spite of the flesh to-day  
"I strove, made head, gained ground upon the whole!"  
As the bird wings and sings,  
Let us cry "All good things  
"Are ours, nor soul helps flesh more, now, than flesh helps soul!" (xii.)

In this complete co-operation of spirit and flesh—if attainable—might be found a satisfactory answer to Sordello's question concerning the possibility of that use of life which should prove a legitimate enjoyment of its gifts, no mere avoidance of its snares.

<sup>1</sup> *Sordello*, Book the Sixth.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

The parable of *The Two Camels* of *Ferishtah's Fancies* is employed to again introduce the subject of asceticism and its uses. The conclusions there reached differ, perhaps, rather in degree than in kind from those which have gone before. Not asceticism, but enjoyment develops best the faculties of man. The perfect achievement of the work allotted him is the object of his existence. Hence the admonition,

Dare  
Refuse no help thereto, since help refused  
Is hindrance sought and found.

The decision, however, goes a step further than that of *Easter Day* where it is noticeable that the professing Christian, who objects to an examination of the basis of his faith, appears to have no anxiety respecting the world at large. The salvation of his individual soul is that which alone concerns him, and pretty well limits his outlook on life temporal and eternal. In *The Two Camels*, Ferishtah, in rejecting asceticism as a mode of life, looks not to its personal effects only, but to those influences which he is bound to transmit to his fellow men. To become a joy-giving medium, individual experience of joy is, he claims, essential, and to be best acquired through a free and grateful acceptance, and a reasonable enjoyment of the blessings of earth.

Just as I cannot, till myself convinced,  
Impart conviction, so, to deal forth joy  
Adroitly, needs must I know joy myself.  
Renounce joy for my fellows' sake? That's joy  
Beyond joy; but renounced for mine, not theirs?

. . . . .  
No, Son: the richness hearted in such joy  
Is in the knowing what are gifts we give,  
Not in a vain endeavour not to know! <sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *The Two Camels.*

That, I believe, we must take as Browning's final word on the subject. Does it differ so widely from the teaching of *Easter Day*? Surely not? The man who feared to enjoy earth lest earth should prove a snare, was taught by the final Judgment that, to a nature of higher capacity, might be possible that full enjoyment of life comprehended in the use of all good things as opportunities for soul-enlargement. An enjoyment following immediately upon the discovery that in all

Of power and beauty in the world,  
The mightiness of love was curled  
Inextricably round about.



## LECTURE VII

LA SAISIAZ



## LECTURE VII

### LA SAISIAZ

THE peculiar interest attaching to *Christmas Eve and Easter Day* is wholly absent from *La Saisiaz*; for here is no uncertainty as to the identity of the speaker, no soliloquist interposed between the author and his public. The dramatic interest absent, the personal interest is, however, proportionately stronger. As in *Prospice* the closing lines are unmistakably the outcome of an overwhelming torrent of feeling, so in the later poem the problems demanding consideration have been forced into prominence by the events of the hour; and the mourner, who was "ever a fighter," will not rest until he has confronted them, and has done all that may be fairly and honestly done towards the settlement of tormenting doubts and fears. Thus, in *La Saisiaz*, we get, perhaps, the sole example in Browning's work of a direct attempt on his part to give to the world a rational and sustained argument, resulting in his personal decision as to the questions immediately involved; the immortality of the soul and the relation of its future to its present phase of existence. It is to this deliberate design that the striking difference in character of these two similarly inspired poems may be mainly attributable: that the joyful assurance of *Prospice* is succeeded by the reasoned hope of *La Saisiaz*. The mourner hesitates to launch himself upon the waves of faith until he

has argued the questions before him in so far as they are capable of argument. For the confidence of *Prospice* that

The fiend-voices that rave  
*Shall* dwindle, *shall* blend,  
*Shall* change, *shall* become . . . a peace out of pain :

we have the hope of *La Saisiaz*,

No more than hope, but hope—no less than hope. (l. 535.)

In place of the triumphant certainty of future reunion,

O thou soul of my soul ! I *shall* clasp thee again,  
 is the answering query—sole response to the question as to  
 mutual recognition in another world

Can it be, and must, and will it ? (l. 390.)

But the problems of *La Saisiaz* are not capable of solution by argument ; there comes a stage at which it is inevitable that faith must supplement and succeed the reasoning powers of the intellect. "Man's truest answer" is, after all, but human : the finite may not grasp the Infinite ; and, looking upon the Infinite as revealed through Nature, man can but reflect

How were it did God respond ?

It is the necessary failure in the attainment of a satisfactory conclusion by ratiocinative methods alone which causes the apparent uncertainty : apparent rather than actual, since, wherever in the course of the discussion feeling is allowed free exercise, there faith—or hope—prevails. In *Prospice*, reasoning offers no check to the emotions, and faith holds complete sway. Though Faith and Reason are no antagonistic forces, the ventures of Faith must yet transcend the powers of Reason, and Reasoning, whilst it may define, is incapable of limiting the province of Faith, since even "true



doctrine is not an end in itself : it cannot carry us beyond the region of the intellect. . . . All formulas are of the nature of outlines : they define by exclusion as well as by comprehension ; and no object in life is isolated. Our premisses in spiritual subjects, therefore, are necessarily incomplete, and even logical deductions from them may be false.”<sup>1</sup>

But whatever the intellectual questionings and uncertainties occurring in the course of the poem itself, the prologue is a pure lyric of spiritual triumph. Though actually the outcome of the premises preceding and the conclusions following the argument between Fancy and Reason, no suggestion of effort is apparent in the joyous song of the soul freed from the trammels of the body to “wander at will,” in the fruition of its fuller life. The reference to its mortal tenement recalls no painful element in the process of material decay ; only autumn woods, the glowing colours of fading leaves and mosses.

Waft of soul's wing !  
What lies above ?  
Sunshine and Love,  
Skyblue and Spring !  
Body hides—where ?  
Ferns of all feather,  
Mosses and heather,  
Yours be the care !

Of the circumstances immediately giving rise to this personal expression of feeling the briefest notice will suffice, the bare facts being stated beneath the title in the latest edition of the works ; whilst for the details necessary to fill in the outline, we have only to turn to the poem itself, reading the first 140 lines. Miss Egerton-Smith was one of

<sup>1</sup> *Christian Aspects of Life*, Westcott, p. 30.

Browning's oldest women friends, but it was not until many years after their first meeting in Florence that their intercourse seems to have become a really important factor in the lives of both: when, after the return to England following his wife's death, the poet temporarily established himself in London with his sister as housekeeper. Miss Egerton-Smith would appear to have been of a nature not readily responsive to the demands of ordinary social intercourse; a nature likely to make special appeal to the man who saw in imperfection, perfection hid, and in complete temporal adaptability the exclusion of possibilities of future growth. Hence we find him writing in the moment of bereavement:

You supposed that few or none had known and loved you in the world:  
May be! flower that's full-blown tempts the butterfly, not flower that's  
furred.

But more learned sense unlocked you, loosed the sheath and let expand  
Bud to bell and out-spread flower-shape at the least warm touch of  
hand

—Maybe, throb of heart, beneath which,—quickenings farther than it  
knew,—

Treasure oft was disembosomed, scent all strange and unguessed hue.  
Disembosomed, re-embosomed,—must one memory suffice,  
Prove I knew an Alpine-rose which all beside named Edelweiss?

(ll. 123-130.)

At the time of the chief intercourse between the two friends, Browning's health rendered it necessary for him to leave England during a part of each year, and for four successive summers Miss Egerton-Smith had been the companion of the brother and sister in their foreign sojourns, when that of 1877 was interrupted by her sudden death from heart disease on the night of September 14th. The villa "La Saisiaz" (in the Savoyard dialect "the Sun"), at which the party was staying, was situated above Geneva, and almost immediately beneath La Salève, the summit of

which was the destination of the expedition occupying Miss Egerton-Smith's thoughts at the time of her death. The shock to her friends was wholly unexpected, as she had been in better health than was usual to her during the days immediately preceding. To Browning it would appear to have been at first overwhelming. It was not long, however, before the emotional and intellectual faculties were sufficiently under control to render the arguments of *La Saisiaz* a possibility. When he added the concluding lines in "London's mid-November," only six weeks had elapsed since that "summons" in the Swiss village which had meant for him temporary bereavement of affection and friendship.

A. The first 400 lines of the poem proper—exclusive of the prologue—constitute a prelude to the formal debate conducted between Fancy and Reason, designed as a rational and logical course of argument by which the writer would assure himself of the immortality of the soul as a no less reasonable hypothesis than is the self-evident fact of the mortality of the body: that the assumption with which instinct forces him to start is also the goal to which reason ultimately draws him. The assumption—

That's Collonge, henceforth your dwelling. All the same, howe'er dis-  
joints

Past from present, no less certain you are here, not there. (ll. 24-25.)

The conclusion—that even though

O'er our heaven again cloud closes . . .

Hope the arrowy, just as constant, comes to pierce its gloom.

(ll. 542-543.)

Line 44 may be not unfitly taken as significant of the whole course of thought

What will be the morning glory, when at dusk thus gleams the lake?

(i) The first part of the prelude (if we may so call it), occupying 139 lines, calls for little more comment than that already necessitated by the foregoing consideration of the circumstances giving rise to the poem. (ii) In taking the solitary walk to the summit of La Salève five days after Miss Egerton-Smith's death, the poet recalls the circumstances of their last climb together; and as he stands looking down upon Collonge, that final resting-place of the body, the question recurs—

Here I stand : but you—where?

The heart has already assured itself that, in spite of the occupation of that dwelling-place at Collonge, the certainty remains, "you are here, not there." But this assurance has proved transitory as the feeling which engendered it. No "mere surmise" will suffice concerning a matter "the truth of which must rest upon no legend, that is no man's experience but our own."<sup>1</sup> So to the author of *La Saisiaz* the suggestion as to proofs of spiritual survival presents itself only to be rejected.

What though I nor see nor hear them? Others do, the proofs  
abound!

Such second-hand evidence is inadmissible.

My own experience—that is knowledge. (l. 264.)

. . . . .

Knowledge stands on my experience : all outside its narrow hem,  
Free surmise may sport and welcome ! (ll. 272-273.)

Here, as with the uncompromising investigator of *Easter Day*, the fact that credence in a certain tenet is desirable, is advantageous, proves cause for rejection rather than acceptance. All evidence must be sifted with the utmost care.

<sup>1</sup> Emerson.

Thus the question is stated in line 144, the answer, or attempted answer to which, is to occupy the entire poem—

Does the soul survive the body?

The second part of the question is on a different platform—

Is there God's self, no or yes?

The existence of God is accepted at the outset of the enquiry as a premise on which the subsequent argument may be based: as is also the existence of the soul: it is the condition of immortality alone which is to be proved. And the poet puts the question, determined to face the truth—whether it meets his “hopes or fears.” It would be difficult to find a more characteristic assertion of Browning's usual attitude than that of lines 149-150.

Weakness never need be falseness: truth is truth in each degree  
—Thunderpealed by God to Nature, whispered by my soul to me.

(iii) But the events of the preceding days have converted the abstract enquiry, “Does the soul survive the body?” into one of vital personal import.

Was ending ending once and always, when you died? (l. 172.)

Hence suggests itself the further question, a necessary sequel to the first. If death is not the ending of the soul's life, what is the *nature* of that immortality, the actuality of which the speaker seeks to establish? We have already seen Cleon emphatically repudiating the theory of Protus as to the satisfaction afforded by a vicarious immortality, “what thou writest, paintest, stays: that does not die.” Equally unsatisfactory to human nature is the suggestion in the present instance of a prolongation and renewal of life by influences transmitted to succeeding generations. And yet is the certainty of the thirteenth century possible to the nineteenth? “Phrase the solemn Tuscan fashioned.”

I believe and I declare—  
 Certain am I—from this life I pass into a better, there  
 Where that lady lives of whom enamoured was my soul.

With this assurance all would be well.

(iv) Now, the mere possibility of propounding questions such as the foregoing, involves the existence of that which asks, and of that to which the enquiry is addressed with at least an anticipation, however vague, of obtaining an answer. In other words, the existence of an intelligent being and an external source of intelligence to which its questionings are directed. These are the only facts on which the speaker would insist as a basis for subsequent argument: but of the certainty of these he is absolutely assured. That their existence is beyond proof he holds as testimony to their reality.

Call this—God, then, call that—soul, and both—the only facts for me. Prove them facts? that they o'erpass my power of proving, proves them such :

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much.

(ll. 222-224.)

God and the soul. The primary fact of life and that which is dependent on the primary. That the soul knows not whence it came nor whither it goes is no argument against either its existence and immortality, or the existence and omnipotent and omniscient control of a divine Being. The relative positions of the rush and the stream lend themselves to the illustration of this assertion. Whatever the purpose of life, it is yet possible that man should exist without possessing assured knowledge concerning his future destiny. All that the rush may conjecture of the course of the stream is "mere surmise not knowledge": nevertheless, the existence of the stream is a fact as self-evident to the onlooker as is that of the rush. Therefore—

Ask the rush if it suspects

Whence and how the stream which floats it had a rise, and where and  
how

Falls or flows on still ! What answer makes the rush except that now

Certainly it floats and is, and, no less certain than itself,

*Is* the everyway external stream that now through shoal and shelf

Floats it onward, leaves it—may be—wrecked at last, or lands on shore  
There to root again and grow and flourish stable evermore.

—May be ! mere surmise not knowledge : much conjecture styled belief,  
What the rush conceives the stream means through the voyage blind  
and brief. (ll. 226-234.)

Thus all man's conjecture as to his future existence is but conjecture : surmise based upon probabilities deduced from the present conditions of life and accumulated experience.

(v) And is then this fact of the present existence of the soul cause sufficient to demand belief in its immortality? The affirmative answer, "Because God seems good and wise," proves inadequate when the eyes of the enquirer are turned to a world in which evil is manifestly existent, and not only existent, but frequently predominant. The possibility of reconciling such conditions with the design of a beneficent omnipotence is only attained through the acceptance of belief in a future life which shall disentangle the complexities of the present ; which shall render perfect that which is imperfect ; complete that which is incomplete. Without such a prospect of the ultimate solution of its problems life would be unintelligible, therefore impossible as the work of an intelligent being : hence the existence of God is denied by implication, and the premise originally accepted (l. 222) is rejected. This question is treated more fully later in the poem (ll. 335-348).

But, granted this possibility of a future, then

Just that hope, however scant,  
Makes the actual life worth leading.

With hope the poet would rest satisfied, since certainty is neither possible, nor, in view of the educative purpose which he claims for life, desirable. Upon this recognition of "life, time,—with all their chances," as "just probation-space," rests one of the main dogmas of Browning's teaching—suggested or expressed in countless passages throughout his works; embodied in most concise form perhaps in the concluding stanzas of *Abt Vogler*. This life being the prelude to another, failure becomes "but a triumph's evidence for the fulness of the days," when for the evil of the present shall be "so much good more": when, indeed, all those unfulfilled hopes which had "promised joy" to the author of *La Saisiaz*, shall find soul-satisfying fulfilment. And all we have willed or dreamed of good shall exist. So long as Eternity may be held to "affirm the conception of an hour," all the seeming inconsistencies of life may admit of solution.

In this passage of *La Saisiaz* recurs also that suggestion so characteristic of Browning—introduced dramatically in *Easter Day*, to be met with again later in the expositions nominally ascribed to Ferishtah—the theory of the adaptation of the entire universe, as known to man, to the needs and development of the individual soul. As in *Easter Day* is depicted by the Vision the work of

Absolute omnipotence,  
Able its judgments to dispense  
To the whole race, as every one  
Were its sole object; (*E.D.*, ll. 662-665.)

so again in *A Camel-driver* is emphasized the individual character of the final Judgment:

Thou and God exist—  
So think!—for certain: think the mass—mankind—  
Disparts, disperses, leaves thyself alone!  
Ask thy lone soul what laws are plain to thee,—



Thee and no other,—stand or fall by them !  
 That is the part for thee: *regard all else*  
*For what it may be—Time's illusion.*

Similarly here the entire scheme of life is to be regarded from the individual standpoint; all outside the "narrow hem" of personal experience can be but the result of surmise. Therefore

Solve the problem: "From thine apprehended scheme of things, deduce Praise or blame of its contriver, shown a niggard or profuse  
 In each good or evil issue! nor miscalculate alike  
 Counting one the other in the final balance, which to strike,  
 Soul was born and life allotted: ay, the show of things unfurled  
 For thy summing-up and judgment,—thine, no other mortal's world!"  
 (ll. 287-292.)

With the acceptance, however, of the doctrine, "His own world for every mortal," recurs again the disturbing reflection inevitable to the contemplation of that world whether in its personal relation, or as a training-ground for "some other mortal." Were the extreme transitoriness and the preponderance of pain indispensable factors in the scheme of instruction?

Can we love but on condition, that the thing we love must die?  
 Needs then groan a world in anguish just to teach us sympathy?  
 (ll. 311-312.)

Certainly personal experience has resulted in the conclusion:

Howsoever came my fate,  
 Sorrow did and joy did nowise,—life well weighed,—preponderate!  
 (ll. 333-334.)

In the discussion which follows (ll. 335-348) the fact of the existence of these evils is employed to enforce the admission of the necessity of a future life. It is in fact the earlier argument (ll. 235, *et seq.*) repeated and elaborated. How are the existing conditions of life to be reconciled with the

belief in the over-ruling Providence of a God whose name is synonymous with goodness, wisdom, and power? Here each attribute is dealt with categorically—Was it proof of the divine Goodness that within the limits of the poet's personal experience

The good within [his] range

Or had evil in admixture or grew evil's self by change? (ll. 337-338.)

Again could it be deemed a token of the divine Wisdom that

Becoming wise meant making slow and sure advance

From a knowledge proved in error to acknowledged ignorance?

(ll. 339-340.)

Finally, seeing that Power must within itself include the force known as Will, could that indeed rank as omnipotence, which was incapable of securing for man even the enjoyment of life possessed by the worm which, on the hypothesis of the non-existence of a future world, becomes "man's fellow-creature," man too being thus but the creature of an hour? Since with the loss of his immortal destiny passes also the reason (according to Browning's reiterated theory) of his imperfection as compared with the more complete physical perfection of the lower world of animal life. If, then, such a consummation is the sole outcome of the Creator's work the conclusion is inevitable, that the Goodness, Wisdom, and Power ascribed to Him must be limited in range and capacity. Thus again the premise originally accepted as a basis of argument has to be rejected—a God possessing merely human attributes is no God. But once more also, though in stronger terms, the conclusion of ll. 242-243:

Only grant a second life, I acquiesce

In this present life as failure, count misfortune's worst assaults  
Triumph, not defeat, assured that loss so much the more exalts  
Gain about to be. (ll. 358-361.)

Thus all experience fairly considered goes to prove the necessity for a future life; and with the hope of such a future is closely interwoven the need also for reunion with those who have already tested the grounds of their belief:

Grant me (once again) assurance we shall each meet each some day.

· · · · ·  
Worst were best, defeat were triumph utter loss were utmost gain.  
(ll. 387-389.)

*B.* Nevertheless, the soul refuses even yet to accept, without that which it deems reasonable proof, the justice of its intuitions and of its hopes arising from experience. It will assume the position of arbitrator in the debate which it permits between the sometime opposing forces of Reason and Fancy, as to the results of an acceptance of that belief, for an assurance of the truth of which it yearns.

*Fancy.* To the facts already admitted as the basis of argument Fancy may, therefore, add a third, "that after body dies soul lives again."

*Reason.* In accepting the challenge to employ these three facts—God, the soul, a future life—in a rational development of the present phase of existence, Reason would reply that deductions from experience suggest that the future life must necessarily prove an advance on the old. This being so, the most prudent course is obviously that which would take, without delay, the step leading from the lower to the higher; always allowing that there is no existent law restrictive of man's free will in this matter.

What shall then deter his dying out of darkness into light? (l. 441.)

*Fancy.* The deterrent is to be found in the suggestion by Fancy of the law rendering penal "voluntary passage from this life to that."

He shall find—say, hell to punish who in aught curtails the term. (l. 463.)

*Reason.* And what influence upon life it must be asked will this new knowledge exert? Life, says Reason, would thus be reduced to a condition of stagnation. The absolute certainty involved in this exact knowledge of the future would stultify action in the present. A result similar to that which, according to Karshish, was attained in the case of Lazarus. The things of this world matter not in view of an ever-present realization of Eternity. The use of faith is at an end as "the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen," since all is clear, definite and, further still, unalterable to the inward vision.

*Fancy.* Again Fancy interposes with the suggestion that this equal realization of future and present must be accompanied by an appreciation of the worth of life temporal and its opportunities, of the eternal import of the deeds wrought in the flesh. Thus the future life completely revealed would not, as Reason holds, supersede the uses of this, but would serve rather as an incentive to action in the present, on the assumption that the virtual reward of performance is reserved for the after-time.

*Reason.* The final position is then examined by Reason. To the original premises—the existence of the soul, an intelligent being, and of a God, the author of an intelligible universe in which man's lot is cast—has been added the certainty of a future world, but a world into which man may not pass until his allotted term has been fulfilled on earth. Further, that in this world to come are to be dealt out allotments of happiness or misery in exact relative proportion to the deeds accomplished during the period of mortal life. That by laws as unerring and relentless as those of Nature's code, pain will follow evil-doing, pleasure will succeed acts of self-devotion to that which is esteemed goodness and truth. Absolute certainty in all things spiritual being

thus established, free will becomes but a name, and the probationary character of life is at an end. Here again a reminiscence of the discussion contained in the early stanzas of *Easter Day* when the Second Speaker suggests that faith may be

A touchstone for God's purposes,  
Even as ourselves conceive of them.  
Could he acquit us or condemn  
For holding what no hand can loose,  
Rejecting when we can't but choose?  
As well award the victor's wreath  
To whosoever should take breath  
Duly each minute while he lived—  
Grant heaven, because a man contrived  
To see its sunlight every day  
He walked forth on the public way. (*E.D.*, iv, ll. 59-70.)

### So *La Saisiaz*

Thenceforth neither good nor evil does man, doing what he must.  
Lay but down that law as stringent "wouldst thou live again, be just!  
As this other "wouldst thou live now, regularly draw thy breath!  
For, suspend the operation, straight law's breach results in death—"  
And (provided always, man, addressed this mode, be sound and sane)  
Prompt and absolute obedience, never doubt, will law obtain! (ll. 497-502.)

The difference between the sanction attaching to laws moral and spiritual, and to those of Nature is not, Reason would hold, the result of defective power on the part of the legislator. Some definite purpose is existent in the scheme of the universe in accordance with which

Certain laws exist already which to hear means to obey;  
Therefore not without a purpose these man must, while those man may  
Keep and, for the keeping, haply gain approval and reward. (ll. 515-517.)

C. In short, the conclusion reached is that already propounded as the outcome of experience—that uncertainty is one of the essential attributes of life temporal. That in its probationary character lies its educative influence. That since "assurance needs must change this life to [him]" the

author of *La Saisiaz*, no less than the soliloquist of *Easter Day*, would willingly continue in that state of probation which fosters growth and development; would cling to that uncertainty which allows of the existence of hope.

As employed by Reason, and generally throughout the poem, the word hope possesses more than the comparatively vague significance commonly attaching to it: it becomes practically synonymous with faith. In a similar sense the term occurs in the *Epistle to the Romans*,<sup>1</sup> when the writer asserts that "we are saved by hope: but hope that is seen is not hope" (the argument which Browning is here using). "For what a man seeth, why doth he yet hope for? But if we hope for that we see not, then do we with patience wait for it." It is further noticeable that here, as elsewhere in Browning, is rejected the belief in a future which shall, in the words of Paracelsus, reduce the present world to the position of "a mere foil . . . to some fine life to come."<sup>2</sup> The necessity for a future life is throughout the argument based upon the fact that immortality is needed to render intelligible the conditions attendant upon life temporal. It is the *unintelligibility* of life, if cut short by death, which demands its renewal beyond the grave.

The concluding lines of the poem proper (immediately preceding the supplementary stanza), although not directly essential to the argument, are especially interesting from the allusions contained in them and the resulting inferences which have met with some diversity of interpretation.

Thanks, thou pine-tree of Makistos, wide thy giant torch I wave. (l. 579.)

is thus explained by Dr. Berdoo in his *Browning Cyclopaedia*.

"The reference to Makistos is from the *Agamemnon* of Æschylus. The town of Makistos had a watch-tower on a

<sup>1</sup> Chap. viii, 24, 25.

<sup>2</sup> *Paracelsus*, iii, 1012-1013.

neighbouring eminence, from which the beacon lights flashed the news of the fall of Troy to Greece. Clytemnestra says

Sending a bright blaze from Ide,  
*Beacon did beacon send,*  
 Pass on—the pine-tree—to Makistos' watch-place."

This pine tree, as "the brand flamboyant," which should replenish the beacon-fire of Makistos, Browning takes as symbolic of fame. The Knowledge and Learning of Gibbon constitute the trunk—

This the trunk, the central solid Knowledge  
 . . . rooted yonder at Lausanne [where Gibbon's History was finished].

But Learning is hardly permitted "its due effulgence," being "dulled by flake on flake of [the] Wit"—nourished at Ferney (sometime the home of Voltaire). To the Learning of Gibbon, the Wit of Voltaire is added in "the terebinth-tree's resin," the "all-explosive Eloquence" of Rousseau and of Diodati:<sup>1</sup> whilst in the heights, above all "deciduous trash," climbs the evergreen of the ivy, significant of the immortality of Byron's poetic fame. Having lifted "the coruscating marvel," the watcher on La Salève would likewise stand as a beacon to those millions who

Have their portion, live their calm or troublous day,  
 Find significance in fireworks.

That by his help they may

Confidently lay to heart . . . . . this:  
 "He there with the brand flamboyant, broad o'er night's forlorn abyss,  
 Crowned by prose and verse; and wielding, with Wit's bauble, Learning's rod . . .

Well? Why, he at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God."

---

<sup>1</sup> The reference in l. 555. "Is it *Diodati* joins the glimmer of the lake?" is to Byron's villa at Geneva. That of l. 590, to the Calvinistic theologian (1576-1614) born at Lucca, famous through his work at Geneva as a preacher, etc.

Of these three concluding lines Dr. Berdoo writes: "Many writers have thought that . . . the poet referred to himself. Of course, any such idea is preposterous; the reference was to Voltaire. Mr. Browning, apart from the question of the egotism involved, could not say of himself, 'he at least believed in soul.' There was no minimizing of religious faith in the poet. Still less could he speak of himself as 'crowned by prose and verse.'" Whence arises Dr. Berdoo's misapprehension? Apart from the context the significance might not be obvious; taken in connection with the passage immediately preceding, it is valuable as adding emphasis to the conclusions of the foregoing argument, and proclaiming in unmistakable language the worth to Browning as a personal possession of that creed which he has just declared himself to hold. Reflecting upon the widespread influence of those literary men whose presence has rendered celebrated the region lying before him, he attributes it to the "phosphoric fame" which attended the path of each. "Famed unfortunates" all, yet "the world was witched" and became enslaved by their pessimistic theories of life. Forced to believe because "the famous bard believed!" because the renowned man of letters could say, "Which believe—for I believe it." Such being the power of fame as an agency for influencing the human mind, what might not the author of *La Saisiaz* achieve, were he, too, armed with this "brand flamboyant!" No pessimistic creed is his, but that which involving an absolute belief in God and in the soul would thence deduce a confidence in "that power and purpose" existent throughout life, indicated and recognized by the presence and revelations of "hope the arrowy." So would he gather in one the fame of his predecessors in the literary world; would become as Rousseau, "eloquent, as Byron prime in poet's power":



Learned for the nonce as Gibbon, witty as wit's self Voltaire.

Thus would he stand "crowned by prose and verse." And why? Because the millions still take "the flare for evidence," and "find significance" in the fireworks of fame. Only by wielding "the brand flamboyant" may he succeed in impressing upon mankind his own supreme assurance. To this end he would desire Fame.

It remains to assign to *La Saisiaz* the position which, as a declaration of faith, it occupies in relation to the poems we have already considered. In *Caliban*, dealing with a peculiar phase of "Natural Theology," we found the suggestions of a deity those derived from the conceptions of a semi-savage being, with whom the intellectual development would seem to have outrun the moral. Passing to the reflections of Cleon, with the Greek theory and practice of life there set forth, we reached the utmost heights attainable by paganism. In *Bishop Blougram's Apology* the unbelief threatening was not that of paganism in the early interpretation of the word, but of the paganism which would substitute authority for faith. With *Christmas Eve* came the individual choice of creed, the voluntary acceptance of the position of worshipper at one of the narrow shrines of human invention; but an acceptance which involved likewise a personal faith in the divinity of Jesus Christ. The faith thus accepted received fuller analysis and investigation through the questionings of *Easter Day*. But all these poems are, as we have been forced to conclude, more or less dramatic in character, the first three wholly, the two last to a degree which we have attempted to define. Only with *La Saisiaz* do we reach the undisguised and definite expression of Browning's personal faith, the basis, though not the culmination of which, is emphatically asserted as a belief in the soul and in God.

At first sight it may appear disappointing to many readers that the irreducible minimum of the creed should contain but these two tenets. On this ground, indeed, we might have been tempted, had such a transposition been justifiable to place *La Saisiaz* before, instead of after, *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, allowing the profession of faith on La Salève to serve as a foundation for the superstructure supplied by the arguments of the listener without the Lecture Hall at Göttingen. On consideration, however, nothing is discoverable in the position occupied by the author of *La Saisiaz* to render untenable that held by the soliloquist of *Christmas Eve* or the First Speaker of *Easter Day*. There is, as we have indeed noticed, a marked similarity between the arguments employed in the two last cases (*La Saisiaz* and *Easter Day*) and in the conclusions reached: in both, the assurance that in the probationary character of this present life, with its possibilities for spiritual development through the exercise of faith, lies its main value.

Mrs. Sutherland Orr admits that Browning "was no less, in his way, a Christian when he wrote *La Saisiaz* than when he published *A Death in the Desert* and *Christmas Eve and Easter Day*, or at any period subsequent to that in which he accepted without questioning what he had learned at his mother's knee. He has repeatedly written or declared in the words of Charles Lamb: 'If Christ entered the room I should fall on my knees'; and again in those of Napoleon: 'I am an understander of men, and *He* was no man.' He has even added: 'If he had been, he would have been an imposter.'" But she has already remarked of the poem that "It is conclusive both in form and matter as to his heterodox attitude towards Christianity." And she continues: "The arguments, in great part negative, set forth in *La Saisiaz* for the immortality of the soul, leave no

place for the idea, however indefinite, of a Christian revelation on the subject."<sup>1</sup> We may indeed regret that such criticism should result from a study of the poem; but, after all, do the truths discussed in *La Saisiaz* involve any immediate question either of the acceptance or rejection of a Christian revelation on this or on any subject? Do they not go deeper, if we may so say, than Christianity itself? Until faith in these fundamental truths has been unassailably established, no basis for Christianity has been secured. To him who is not yet "sure of God," the revelation of God in Christ can have little meaning. For whilst far more than the belief necessarily implied in the confession on La Salève must be held essential to the fulness of life, without it no superstructure of faith is possible. Its very strength would seem to lie in the fact that, avoiding the limitations of strictly defined dogma, it "leaves place" for all subsequent revelations of spiritual truth.

And what *is* "the Christian revelation" on these matters? The questions concerning death, immortality, and future recognition and reunion, ever suggesting themselves in new form to the human heart and intellect, are yet unanswered. Even that "acknowledgment of God in Christ" to which the dying Evangelist points as to the solution of "all questions in the earth and out of it,"<sup>2</sup> implies the acceptance of a creed not necessarily involving a revelation of the future life. The teaching of the Gospel serves as *present* inspiration of a faith content to leave the future in the confidence

Our times are in His hand  
Who saith "A whole I planned."<sup>3</sup>

Life eternal is there defined, not with reference to a future

<sup>1</sup> *Life and Letters of R. Browning*, pp. 318-319.

<sup>2</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 474-476.      <sup>3</sup> *Rabbi Ben Ezra*, i.

state, but as the knowledge of God, the beginnings of which are attainable here and now, by present service and self-devotion: to him who should do the will should the doctrine be made known.<sup>1</sup> The record of the intercourse between the Master and His disciples during the forty days following the resurrection is silent concerning any lifting of the veil before which they so consciously stood. That Browning was a Christian in the broadest, deepest, and possibly in the least conventional acceptance of the term, it was the attempt of the last Lecture to demonstrate by a consideration of the dramatic poems bearing reference to Christianity and its relation to human life. And there is no word throughout *La Saisiaz* which should preclude belief in the conclusions of David in *Saul* or of St. John in *A Death in the Desert*. To the man who was "very sure of God"—who had recognized the Divine revelation in Nature—an acceptance of the more immediate and special revelation was but a natural sequence. "Ye believe in God, believe also in me":<sup>2</sup> when the assertion holds good the command is not difficult of fulfilment. Whilst extreme caution is necessary in dealing with a matter in which the student is too readily tempted to "find what he desires to find," the historical and logical necessity for an Incarnation was, as we have seen, so favourite a theme with Browning for dramatic treatment, that it is wellnigh impossible to dissociate the personal interest. This subject the reflections of *La Saisiaz* do not directly approach.

He at least believed in Soul, was very sure of God.

The creed so expressed meant for the author a gain, once experienced, too great to remain unshared. No mere abstract belief, but an assurance of which he could assert

Fact it is I know I know not something which is fact as much. (l. 224.)

<sup>1</sup> *Gospel of St. John*, xvii, 3; vii, 17.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv, 1.

For him the power and the purpose which he beheld, "if no one else beheld," ruling in Nature and in human life were alike Love. The last word on the subject comes to us direct, unmodified by any dramatic medium—

Power is Love—

. . . . .  
From the first, Power was—I knew.  
Life has made clear to me  
That, strive but for closer view,  
Love were as plain to see.

When see? Where there dawns a day,  
If not on the homely earth,  
Then yonder, worlds away,  
Where the strange and new have birth,  
And Power comes full in play.<sup>1</sup>

The hope of *La Saisiaz* has become the assurance of the *Reverie*.

This recognition of "the continuity of life" is the main inspiration, the invigorating principle of Browning's creed. Cleon *felt* the necessity which Reason demonstrated on La Salève. Yet again, eleven years later, the author of *Asolando* can speak with absolute confidence of the certainty that death will afford no interruption to the energies, the activities, the progress of the soul's life. That he who has *here* "never turned his back" will *there* still continue the forward march. It is, in other words, the faith of Pompilia which can look beyond the limitations of the present to the boundless developments of which this life, with its struggles and apparent failures, is but the beginning: and in the hour of defeat can hold that "No work begun shall ever pause for death."

<sup>1</sup> *Reverie, Asolando.*

It is in the midst of the "bustle of man's work-time" that "the unseen" is to be greeted. Is it too much to say that Browning, in the admonition of these closing lines of the *Asolando Epilogue*, makes confession of his belief in the Communion of Saints? But it is characteristic that the expression of faith (if such we may account it) is made in terms which admit of no distinctly formulated definition. The command comes as an inspiration to the seen and the unseen.

Greet the unseen with a cheer!  
 Bid him forward, breast and back as either should be,  
 "Strive and thrive!" cry "Speed,—fight on, fare ever  
 There as here!"

The underlying confidence is beyond that of the reasoning of *La Saisiaz*, but not far in advance of the joyful spontaneity of the *Prologue*

*Dying we live.*  
 Fretless and free,  
 Soul, clap thy pinion!  
 . . . . .  
 Body shall cumber  
 Soul-flight no more.

And if—admitting that Browning, even when writing *La Saisiaz*, possessed the assurance thus expressed—we ask why he should have rested satisfied with the confession of faith contained in its concluding line, the answer must be—that the author of *La Saisiaz* is to be numbered amongst that small minority of religious teachers for whom it may be claimed that "they cannot fail to recognize that the formulas which express the Truth suggested by the facts of their Creed are themselves of necessity partial and provisional." It is impossible to doubt that with him the consciousness was strongly present, that "Formulas do not exhaust the Truth"; that "the character and expression of Doctrine . . . is re-

lative to the age.”<sup>1</sup> That in proportion as satisfaction is found in formula does faith lose its life-giving power. Progress being the law of life, he would, therefore, enforce upon no man as binding formulae of which the comparative inelasticity might tend to fetter mental or spiritual development. On the contrary, he would have the seeker after Truth prepared to relinquish in due time definitions once essential, since threatening to become restrictive to growth. Before all things, is to be avoided the danger of resting on that which is not the Truth itself, but merely a necessary introduction to the Truth. Hence,

The help whereby he mounts,  
The ladder-rung his foot has left, may fall,  
Since all things suffer change save God the Truth.<sup>2</sup>

Only through such employment of the means may the end be attained, since whether it be concerning “God the Truth,” “the eternal power,” or “the love that tops the might, the Christ in God,” in all

New lessons shall be learned . . .  
Till earth’s work stop and useless time run out.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Christian Aspects of Life*, Westcott, Macmillan, pp. 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> *A Death in the Desert*, 429-431.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 266-267.





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